

# THE CLAIMS OF FRENCH POETRY

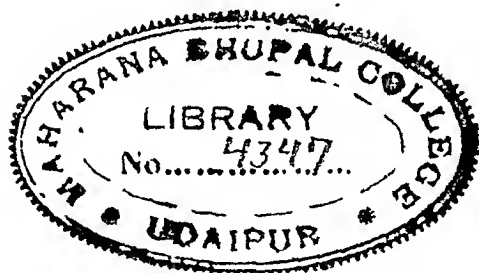
# THE CLAIMS OF FRENCH POETRY

NINE STUDIES IN THE  
GREATER FRENCH POETS

BY

JOHN C. BAILEY

AUTHOR OF 'STUDIES IN SOME FAMOUS LETTERS' AND OF  
'THE POEMS OF WILLIAM COWPER, EDITED WITH  
AN INTRODUCTION AND NOTES'



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## P R E F A C E

THE following Essays are partly an appeal against the common neglect of French poetry by English lovers of literature, and partly an attempt at explaining that neglect, and even, to some extent and in some cases, at justifying it. It seems to me that there is in England a widespread opinion that French poetry is merely rhetoric in verse, and I have tried to deal both with the foundation for this opinion and with its limitations; and in particular have tried to show by examples how partial its application is, and to prove by liberal quotation how much pleasure may be got out of the French poets even by those whose conception of poetry makes them demand of it things far above rhetoric.

The studies were written at different times, but those which have appeared before have been revised with a view to this book. I have to thank Mrs. George Cornwallis-West for leave to reprint the essays on English Taste and French Drama and on Ronsard, which were first printed in *The Anglo-Saxon Review*; Messrs. Macmillan and Co. for the same permission in the case of the essay on La Fontaine, much of which originally appeared in

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*Temple Bar*; Messrs. Chapman and Hall for leave to reprint the essay on Heredia, originally published in *The Fortnightly Review*; and Messrs. Blackwood and Sons for the same courtesy with regard to the essay on Chénier, which first appeared in *Blackwood's Magazine*. The other essays, as well as additions to these, have been written with a view to the publication of the present volume.

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## INTRODUCTORY

## INTRODUCTORY

THE object of this book is, as has already been said in the Preface, to attempt to discover, and then to illustrate, what may be a reasonable attitude for an English lover of poetry to take up with regard to some of the poets of France. It is written from a frankly English point of view. The reader is assumed to be familiar with the English poets, and it is from them that comparisons and contrasts are most often derived. The Greek poets, indeed, are not altogether forgotten, nor their Roman followers: nor, again, some of the Italians and Germans: so that it is hoped the reproach of a standard exclusively English is avoided. For, of course, art in its highest sense is not a national thing at all. That is the last heresy of an age in which racial and national feeling has been exalted out of all measure. The fact that a Frenchman is slower to appreciate Shakespeare than an Englishman, or an Englishman slower to appreciate Molière than a Frenchman, may be simply the result of defective culture. If race and nation open our eyes to some things, they blind them to others. The man whose poetic taste had reached perfect cultivation, and who was as much at home in all literary languages as Porson was in Greek or Gibbon in French, would appreciate all poets at their absolute and true valuation. No



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patriotic predilections would bribe his judgment, no national animosity warp it, no difficulty of language or unfamiliarity of atmosphere obstruct it. To deny that this, or something like it, is the direction in which we must look for the ideal final court of literary appeal, to prefer the narrower national constitution, is deliberately to place prejudice before truth. So much ought clearly to be recognised. We must know what we mean by the ideal before we can deal with the actual. After that we are entitled to confess that all ideals worth having are things almost out of sight, seen at the end of a long vista of actualities, and that, while we do not forget to refresh or stimulate ourselves by an occasional glance at the distant ideal, we may and must live and work in conditions that are still a long way short of it. The ideal critic is not much easier to meet with than the ideal statesman or the ideal Christian. We have to deal with the facts as they are. Few people know foreign languages as well as their own: few are free from national prejudices. That being so, and the admission that it is a limitation and not a strength, a loss and not a gain, having been frankly made, we are surely entitled to take facts as we find them, and to admit that the view we are attempting to take of French poetry is no more than a very far-off approximation to the ideal, being, quite undisguisedly, such a view as an Englishman can present and Englishmen receive.

How frankly English it is will be seen in a succeeding essay in which an attempt is made to deal with the difficulties Englishmen find in accepting the claims made by the French on behalf of their great

tragedians. It would have been dishonest as well as futile to attempt to ignore that great stumbling-block which so many generations of Englishmen have found at the threshold of the study of French poetry. How has it ever been possible that the French should rank Racine with Shakspeare or the Greeks! How have they ever come to fancy that he is one of the half dozen great poets of the world? A French critic, particularly one of the older sort, would perhaps feel that there is something narrowly English even in such a statement of the question. I can only say that I have honestly tried to deal with it on its merits quite apart from national prejudices; I have tried to argue the question as if before a judge who was neither French nor English. No doubt we can only try to escape our nationality: escape it absolutely and altogether we never can. But the problem is one of the most interesting literary problems that can be raised; and any solution of it that has even a partial truth in it ought to have its use. I have not been ashamed to confess that I do not think it is mere national prejudice which makes us deny to Corneille and Racine what we freely grant to Dante and Goethe; and I have tried to give some reasons for my belief. But let them wait for the moment. If it is right to justify our hesitation or opposition in this matter of French poetic claims so far as they are capable of justification, what are we to say where they are not? The English prejudice against French poetry, starting with this dislike of the French classical drama, has gone further. It is, as a rule, not definite or limited; it is indefinite and general. And that is where the

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mistake lies. It *is* true, so far as I can judge, that the claim of Racine to rank with Virgil or Corneille with Æschylus is one that will not bear examination: but it does not follow from that that French poetry as a whole is a thing we may put aside as not worthy of attention. Every one who wishes to know France as a whole must know her poetry: and every one who wishes to study poetry as a whole must study the poetry of France. A great critic, who was as French in his love of reason as he was the reverse of French in his moral seriousness, spoke of France as 'famed in all great arts, in none supreme': and that is true. But no one who cares for the study of sculpture would be content to be unacquainted with the charming work of Jean Goujon or Germain Pilon, or, in our own day, the profound work of Rodin, even though there is no doubt that the sculpture of the French Renaissance never equalled the Italian, and that Rodin, great as he is, is far from equalling the Greeks, or even Michael Angelo. In the same way, there may be nothing in French poetry that can be placed beside Dante or Milton or even Goethe: but there is much that no lover of France and no lover of poetry can afford to ignore. The unique fascination of France is not absent from her poetry. The Latin genius, with its legal, logical habits, its determination to understand itself, to measure its words and say exactly what it means, is not compatible, no doubt, with great creative efforts on the scale of *King Lear* or the *Agamemnon*. For them the soul, the thing which soars and dreams, has to get a little freer of the mind, the thing which understands and judges, than,

perhaps, it ever does in France. But even France has had her free spirits. No one who has not read Villon quite understands the passion of moral rebellion that was always seething under the fair formal crust of the mediæval Church and Empire. No other country can rival those amazing ballads in which the thing we call Bohemianism, defiance of law, scorn of custom, contempt of morals, for once, and perhaps once only, got itself uttered in fire, and showed what perhaps is not to be seen elsewhere, that freedom, untamed and untameable, has its moments of creation. Then the boundless force that the French Revolution let loose is nowhere seen as it is seen in Hugo. Those seventy or eighty volumes, hurrying hot from the press, are the literary counterpart of the rushing armies of the Revolution: and Hugo's inexhaustible fertility and energy know no parallel except that of Napoleon. Still, no doubt, these fiery spirits are not the characteristic product of France. For that, if we leave the incomparable urbanity of Molière, the fine irony of Pascal, the noble and stately eloquence of Bossuet, the grace and pleasantness of Madame de Sévigné, the brilliant wit and exquisite lucidity of Voltaire, —if we leave these things, and come to poetry, we must turn, not to men like Villon and Hugo, but to men of more 'even-balanced' temper, men like La Fontaine with his gift of dreaming steadied by his humour, like Charles d'Orléans with his freedom of fancy and ease of graceful utterance kept in check by the decorum of a court, to Ronsard or Du Bellay, or again to Chénier, with their genuine fire of poetic enthusiasm purified and ennobled and strengthened,

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if you like, but still chastened and corrected, by the constant companionship of the great masters of classical antiquity. The main stream of French poetry runs within bounds which it has no wish to overflow. It belongs to a type of which the immortal and unsurpassed example is Horace. It is seldom, perhaps never, so weighty, of such high and noble utterance, so finally felicitous in phrase, as he is at his best. On the other hand, in lightness, in a kind of exquisite airy gracefulness, which, but for Catullus, we might have thought unattainable in that grave Roman speech, it surpasses him. But, whatever the differences in form, it is essentially of his school in its attitude to life and art. The highest heights and the deepest depths are not so much out of its reach as out of its ken. That sounds fatal at first, especially to ears attuned to Shakspeare. But how many generations, and not least in England, have found it the very opposite of fatal to Horace? It is the business of poetry to adorn life, and not only to search it out. If it cannot enlarge, it may vivify and ennoble. Horace was an accomplished and thoughtful man of the world, who enjoyed the spectacle of human life, and gives it back to us touched with his own dignity and charm. He is no Æschylus, no Job, no Shakspeare, to plunge down into the abyss of human destiny or rise to its fiery heights. He walks the middle way of life, which we all walk: and the point is that we all find it much prettier and much more interesting because he has walked it before us. The return of spring is a thing we could not anyhow have failed to enjoy; but *Solvitur acris hiems* and *Diffugere nives* have for

ever quickened our delight. The winter fireside is among the most universal and obvious of pleasures: but it comes back fresher and keener to us as we go through his *Dissolve frigus, ligna super fœco Large reponens*: and we call our friends to the old and innocent pleasures of the table with added cheerfulness as we remember Thaliarchus. The agony and ecstasy of love are not for every one; and those who want them must go to Catullus or Shakspeare or Burns, or Goethe or Heine, or, at any rate, not to Horace; but the pathos of life comes to all, and where can they find it better than in *Linquenda tellus*? Few of us are saints or seers: but all want a wisdom of every day, and all find something of what they want in *Æquam memento* and *Auream quisquis medioeritatem*. Those who know least of the awe or of the romance of Nature can feel the pleasantness of this delightful earth of ours: and where is it pleasanter than in *O fons Bandusiæ* to which Ronsard owed so much? And, if we do not understand Wordsworth's notion of what it is to be a poet, and are overawed at Milton's, every one who has ever cared for literature has a fellow-feeling with Horace as well as a wondering delight in the beauty of his verse, when the book of the Odes lies open at *Quem tu, Melpomene*. That is Horace: and that is also the natural genius of France. The mistake has been that the French have so often claimed Virgil as their kindred spirit—Virgil, the mystic, the dreaming, brooding spirit with a secret of his own which could not get fully uttered, and a passion for straining to catch the secret voice of the universe, which is only to be heard so fitfully and at such distance.

Nothing can be less like the central spirit of France. No: it is not Virgil but Horace whom they should look back to as their ancestor. The broad way across the plain of life, not the difficult paths over the mountains; the common joys of every day, not the rare moments that come to rare spirits; the charm of life and the sorrow and the sympathy, not the ecstasy or the secret: that, in spite of Verlaine and Maeterlinck and the Symbolists, is the stock of French poetry, as it is the note of French life. In both there is the genius of good sense, the worship of the golden mean. The great Revolution itself is hardly more than an apparent exception to this rule: for the very key to it is that its madness was the madness of reason stung to fury by the obstinate irrationality of the *Ancien Régime*.

It is true that the most characteristic expression of this national temper is to be looked for in the prose writers of France, or at any rate in those poets whose verse, like that of Molière, has nothing of poetry about it except the single fact of metre. But that does not alter the fact that there is a way of uttering this temper or attitude which, if not the most characteristic, is the most beautiful, and that is here, as everywhere, the way of poetry. And it is the object of this book to try to convince English readers that, if French poetry never, perhaps, climbs the highest heights, it still dwells distinctly above the prose levels of the plain, inhabiting upland glades of its own, which are delightful in their freshness, their fragrance, their beauty, their pleasantly varied rise and fall. No prose could hope for a moment to do what La Fontaine does for the life

of the people : no prose could give the exquisiteness of a Court as Charles d'Orléans gives it : no prose could have consoled Du Périer with the Latin grace of Malherbe's Ode, or adorned the life of scholars and soldiers and lovers, or the life of trees and flowers, as Ronsard adorns it. And yet none of these, not even La Fontaine or Ronsard, are at all apt to travel far from the standpoint of ordinary cultivated men with some gift of imagination. They only show what delightful views that standpoint has to offer us. La Fontaine goes deepest into these common things : Ronsard sees most of their colour and their grace. Typically French he is, indeed, perhaps more typical than any one of the old France, with something of its fiery Oriflamme in him, and something also of the simple loveliness of its Fleur de Lys. But even he, for all his high gifts and all his just sense of proclaiming a new world in which civilisation and beauty were to dwell, is still a poet, not of the Æschylean sort which discovers, but of the Horatian sort which adorns.

The essays which follow are attempts to study some of the poets who exemplify this general law of French poetry, and one or two of the exceptions. Their object will be attained if they at all increase the number of English readers who pay some attention to French poetry. We all read French prose : it has been my wish to urge that, fine as French prose is, it does not give us, because no prose can, some of the finer qualities of the French race, and that French poetry does give them. We all read, or pretend to read, the English poets. I have not



denied that they are greater than the French. But I suggest that the very fact that these last are French, and not English, is in itself a proof that they have something to say to the lover of poetry which no English poet can say. There are things which are French, and which it is useless to look for in an Englishman. But that is not all. There are also gifts or qualities which might just as well have come to English poets as to French, but have, as a matter of fact, come to French and not to English. We might have had a lyric poet who represented the scholarship of the sixteenth century, the literary fire and enthusiasm of the Renaissance, as Ronsard represents it. But we have not. The English Elizabethan scholars, men like Ben Jonson and Drummond, produced no such poetry as Ronsard. The greater men did not want to do this particular thing. Shakspeare's mind was too full of bigger things to allow of his being absorbed by the enthusiasm of scholarship, and Spenser's face was always half turned away from his own day to watch the last fading colours of the Middle Age. Ronsard, then, and no Englishman, is the poet who embodies one of the most attractive phases through which the cultivated mind of Europe has passed. Or take a more modern instance. The nineteenth century saw a curious return of that sensitiveness to the religious or philosophic influences of the East which was one of the most striking facts in the Roman world both before and after the coming of Christ, and has been unknown from that day to this. Well, all great poetry is tinged by the thought of the age it belongs to, and the greatest—

like that of Dante—is a complete poetic presentation of the mind of its generation. Hugo's peculiarly intellectual gifts, his powers of thinking, were not remarkable enough to enable him to be in this way the speaking mind of his contemporaries. Little as he knew it, he could never meet the great intellects of his time on an equal footing, as Sophocles, for instance, or Dante, or Milton, or Goethe, or even Coleridge, could. He is unrivalled as the instrument over whose keys every popular movement, every popular emotion, everything of every kind that could become popular, had passed, and made in passing such music as none had imagined was in it. And indeed, except on that incomparable instrument, no such music could have been made. But great thing as it is to be the poetic voice of a people's hopes and fears, it is not the same thing as embodying the mind that, above the people and all unknown to them, is changing their creed or modifying their lives while it lays the unseen foundations of the creed and lives of the generation which is to follow them. That Victor Hugo could not do, and so he is not the Virgil or Dante of his age, though he comes nearer it than any one else. The expression, then, the poetic expression, of the intellectual life of the nineteenth century must be looked for in separate pieces. Well, one of them is that which gives us that Eastern influence of which mention was just now made. The mind, in some respects the highest mind, of the nineteenth century felt a profound attraction for the mystic quietism, the everlasting acquiescence of the East. That would not fit with Hugo's rest-

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less hurrying after every new social or political reform. It would not fit with Tennyson's Anglo-Saxon manliness, or with Browning's eager optimism and intellectual agility, or even with Arnold's sad stoic endurance. The thing was English as much as French: but here again it so happened that the man who made it poetry was not an Englishman but a Frenchman. It might have been a Frenchman who made the great revelation of Man and Nature: but it was Wordsworth. It might have been an Englishman who made himself the voice of a more than Oriental apathy, who, inheriting, perhaps, a tropical indolence of soul and body, denied all those pleasures of action and hope in which the life of Europe consists, and turned, not for consolation but for a luxury of despair, to a kind of material Nirvana in which nothing remains of beauty except the memories which it scorns and the verse which describes them: it might have been an Englishman, but it was a Frenchman, Leconte de Lisle. It might have been an Englishman who, in an 'age of drab,' as we have been told, saw the history of the world, perhaps for the last time, as a pageant of splendour and glory: but it was José Maria de Heredia. And it might have been an Englishman who, in a generation that thinks, perhaps, more of goodness and justice and less of sin and judgment and God than any that has gone before it, gave such utterance to the cry of the sinner in the presence of his Judge and Saviour as recalls the Psalmist and the Publican: but it was Paul Verlaine.

These are only instances. Others could be easily

given. But they are enough to show that if we disregard French poetry, we are content to be ignorant of some of the things that are best worth knowing about France and about poetry. Well, we have all been awakening during the last year or two to the delightful possibilities that lie in friendship with France. Commercial and political persons are engaged in studying France, and in instructing the rest of us about France. Why may not literature play her part in the alliance? It is not a flourish of rhetoric but a sober and exact truth that a study of a nation's literature is not only one of the best ways of understanding it, but one of the surest ways of acquiring a friendly feeling towards it. No one can give six months of his leisure to French without feeling an increased sympathy for France. Here, as in greater matters, perfect knowledge is not far removed from love. To see a man with his own spectacles, to get behind the veil that hides motive and desire, is generally to sympathise with him, at best to love him, at worst to pity him. And it is the same with a people. To know the French, then, we must know their poetry. It is there that for four or five hundred years the soul of France has laid up, not the whole of her hopes and fears, but a very fine fragment of them, and the best-preserved of all. And there we can go to see it. Indeed, reading books is just that ; going to see such fragments of themselves as human beings have been able to give form to, pieces of human clay that have received the shape and colour in which the life of art consists. And the very finest of these fragments are poems,

at once the profoundest, the most intimate, and the most beautiful, of all written things. Aristotle said that poetry was a greater and more serious thing than history. Well, that is ultimately because it contains more of human life, and human life of a deeper and more permanent quality. No history of the Trojan War could have given us the eternal humanity of the *Iliad*; no life of Æneas could have revealed the mystery of the human heart, the yearning of a world that had not found rest, as the *Æneid* reveals them. These and such as these are the supreme achievements of the poets, no doubt: but the law is the same for all. Poetry exists only on condition of its humanity. History may be abstract, science may be frankly inhuman, even art may be merely formal; but poetry must be full of human life. The poet may give us himself as Milton and Shelley did, or other people as Homer and Shakspeare, but human beings, human life, human feelings and thoughts, he must give, or he is dead before he is born. He is the voice, not of facts, the most ephemeral of all things, but of faith and desire, of emotions and imaginations, of all those movements of the human mind which are for ever changing but never pass away, by which we recognise each other across the ages and feel ourselves to be members of one spiritual family. That unity is discoverable amid all the diversity of the various members. The diversity is the obvious thing, but the unity is the deeper and truer. There is no diversity more obvious than that between the French character and the English, or the poetry of France and that of England.

Yet the unity is there, hidden only, for, the most part, by externals of form and fashion. And the quest of it is the search for the universal and eternal element which is deeper and greater than anything merely national.

ENGLISH TASTE AND  
FRENCH DRAMA

## ENGLISH TASTE AND FRENCH DRAMA

IT is recorded of Mr. Gladstone that he confessed to seeing nothing in the masterpieces of Molière but third-class plays. This amazing piece of criticism is not merely one more proof of the great Liberal leader's absolute lack of the eye and ear which find their delight in the everlasting human comedy; it also exhibits, in one who was in so many ways a true representative of his countrymen, an extreme instance of the incapacity of Englishmen to discover great qualities in French verse. Except for a moment at the Restoration, English literary opinion has always rather scornfully rejected the claim of French poets to rank among the supreme masters of their art; and, even at the Restoration, the one voice to whose critical authority we still bow with respect, was again and again raised in bold assertion of the greatness of Shakspeare and Milton, and equally bold denial of French claims on our obedient imitation. Since Wordsworth and the Revolution, English criticism has, in spite of the new birth of Romanticism and all the talent placed at its service, been even more grudging in its admiration. The art of Victor Hugo has had its distinguished enthusiasts, of course; but the main current of cultivated opinion has remained cold, if not contemptuous.



And this is not mere ignorance or mere insular arrogance. We know at least as much of French poetry as Frenchmen know of English. Indeed, there is evidence that we know more; for no one here would think, in writing a book about a French poet, of giving quotations from an English version instead of from the French original, while English poetry can apparently be presented to the French public only in the form of translation, if we may judge by Sainte-Beuve's practice in the *Causeries* or, to take a more recent instance, that of M. Legouis in his excellent study of Wordsworth, where the *Prelude* appears in a French dress, as the *Task* had done before it in Sainte-Beuve. And this seems to be the usual course. The result of this contrast is, of course, that we are in a much better position to judge them than they are to judge us, for no translation of poetry has ever given more than a faint reflection of the original. Nor is our opinion, true or false, the result of our real or imaginary arrogance. The wonderful lucidity of the French intellect, and the great qualities of French prose, with its extraordinary gift for putting things into pointed unforgettable phrases, have nowhere been more unreservedly recognised than in this country. And, if we grant unhesitatingly to Goethe and Heine, to Dante and Ariosto and Leopardi, what we deny to Corneille and Racine, it at least cannot be insular prejudice which grants or denies. What is it, then? Is it possible for us to explain to a Frenchman, or even to ourselves, what it is which we find wanting in so much of their poetry?

To discuss that question fully a whole theory of

poetic art would be necessary. But, without attempting anything of that kind, it may be possible to find some considerations which form an approach to its solution. Infinity is a large word and a vague one; but, if we refuse to be afraid of it, it will perhaps give us better than any other what seems to an Englishman the capital defect of the French poets. Some one has said that a really great landscape always has an opening in the trees or buildings of its background through which one may gaze over a view distant enough to suggest to the imagination the whole boundless stretch of infinite space. There is just the same law in poetry. The poet in showing the individual must suggest the universal, in speaking of the seen must seem to speak also of the unseen, must deal with time as if he touched eternity. There is no French poet who does this as Dante and Goethe do it, or as Shakspeare and Milton. French poetry is too much occupied with saying what it has to say, and saying it with unequalled point and precision. But that is the special business of prose, not of poetry. It is of the very essence of poetry to suggest a thousand things which it can never say. Its effect, a totally different one to that of the best prose, is produced as much by breathed hints and whispers as by spoken words, as much, one might almost say, by silence as by speech. It is the weakness of French poetry that it too rarely works in this way: above all it is the weakness of French drama. Whatever idea Corneille and Molière and Racine set themselves to express is expressed to the full, presented in form after form, looked at from every point of view,—in a word exhausted. And that is almost the same

thing as saying that the ideas of these poets are not in truth, or at any rate not in the highest sense, poetic ideas; for the highest poetry has always in it something of the infinite, which is that which cannot be exhausted. The French drama leaves on us a sense that the world is a definite comprehensible place, with great events indeed in it, and strong passions, and splendid personalities, but nothing that escapes the reach of the poet's vision. The greatest poetry, on the other hand, pictures to us a world which may be a garden of beauty or a desert of sin, but is in either case surrounded by the wonder and mystery of an infinite space into which the keenest eye can penetrate but a very little way. The grief of Andromache is great and greatly told as we find it in the verse of Racine. The grief of Lear and Desdemona is beyond all human telling.

This can be illustrated in detail. Take, for instance, a particular emotion with which many poets have dealt. There are few things more moving to human sympathy than the wish of the dying to be remembered after death. Naturally it has not escaped the great poets. Racine has it in one of the finest and most touching couplets he ever wrote:

Parle-lui tous les jours des vertus de son père,  
Et quelquefois aussi parle-lui de sa mère.

So speaks Andromache of Astyanax, believing that she will be dead before many hours are over. Racine rarely produced a line of such intimately human tenderness as the second of these, nor did his art often reach its aim with this consummate simplicity and ease. But hear Shakspeare:

Absent thee from felicity awhile,  
 And in this harsh world draw thy breath in pain  
 To tell my story.

Is it possible not to feel the difference? Few poets could have given us more of the feelings of Andromache than Racine does; but we have simply no ear for them after listening to Shakspeare. We can think no more of Andromache, for we have heard a voice in which there is an echo of something much deeper, of the whole tragedy of life. The two things are no more comparable than the love of Achille and Iphigénie is to that of Romeo and Juliet.

That is where the difference lies. Infinity, mystery, wonder, the unexplained, the inexplicable, 'thoughts that do often lie too deep for tears,' that is what we find in Homer and the great Greeks, in Dante, Shakspeare, Milton, Wordsworth, Coleridge, Goethe; and do not find to the same extent in any Frenchman, especially in the classical period. The poetry of Villon and the *Pléiade* is genuine, admirable, delightful; so is that of La Fontaine; and so, again, that of Chénier in the eighteenth century, and that of Hugo, De Musset, Baudelaire, Heredia, in the nineteenth; but it has never been claimed for any of these, except Ronsard and Hugo, that they should rank with the world-poets, and in Hugo's case, as well as Ronsard's, the claim may only lead to a reaction of quite undeserved oblivion. At any rate, great as Hugo unquestionably is, he is still too near us to be safely accepted as a throned Olympian. The world has never had a poet more certain of immortality than La Fontaine; but, un-

approachably perfect as he is in his own field, La Fontaine never attempts to rise to the region inhabited by the greatest poets. The claim of France to have given the world a poet of the rank of the eight or ten great men, to whom it is our glory to have contributed two, must at present rest on what it achieved in the classical period. If we put aside Molière of whom I shall speak presently, the world-poet of France is in fact Corneille or Racine, or it is no one at all. And the question, once put in that form, can only receive one answer from an Englishman, however much pleasure French poetry may have given him. He would almost as soon think of placing *Cato* or *Irene* by the side of *Macbeth*. For it must not be forgotten that we have had a whole series of plays done on the so-called classical lines which have been famous enough in their day, but are now absolutely unread and unreadable. That fate will never overtake the great French tragedies. Their merits are too obvious and of too high an order. Vigour unfailing, inexhaustible eloquence, abundance of dramatic ingenuity, an unvarying technical perfection such as no Englishman except Milton has ever attained, these are gifts that can never lose their value as long as poetry is a fine art. But assuredly, as long as poetry is a mystery brooding over a mystery, they will not be enough to place their possessor among those mighty men whose feelings after the key to the secret of life have made us think of them as almost divinely inspired. We have something quite different from eloquence or ingenuity in our minds when we think of the 'pii vates et Phœbo digna locuti' of the great Roman poet.

And that brings me to another point. One cannot quote Virgil in connection with Racine without being reminded that French critics have found a particularly intimate likeness between the two poets. We grant, they say, that Racine cannot ride the whirlwind of life's storms as Shakspeare does, that he is not an original creator on the Shakspearian scale, that we do not find in his plays the whole pellmell of human existence; but that is not his special task. His place as a world-poet is assured; but for a parallel to him among his peers in that company we must go, not to the lawless splendours of Shakspeare, not to the grim mediævalism of Dante, but to the classical poets of antiquity, and, above all, to Virgil, the perfect workman, the serene and flawless artist. It may be that *Phèdre* will never interest the world as *Lady Macbeth* does; but it is equally true that *Æneas* will not compare with *Achilles* as a hero. Yet the perfection of Virgil is allowed to atone for his dramatic weakness. Why is not the same measure meted to Racine?

This really brings us back to the question of what is the essential quality of poetry claiming to be the very highest. We say that Virgil has it and Racine has not. What is it? And there is a cognate question. Is it the fact, as the French think, that the difference between Shakspeare and Racine is the difference between the classical manner and the modern or romantic? What is the fundamental excellence in style of the great Greeks and Romans? These are not easy questions; but a word may be said about them. It is obvious that Racine imi-

tated the formal and external features of ancient drama, and that Shakspeare did not. And, in spite of the discredit into which the once famous 'unities' are now fallen, I think it is certain that Racine stumbled, as it were, half by accident into great advantages by doing so. The unities of time and place are of no importance in themselves; but they help to bring about the other which is. The most absolute of all conditions of vitality for a work of art, of whatever kind, is unity of action or interest. The picture must have a central subject dominating the canvas, the musical composition a dominant theme, the poem or play a principal personage or train of events to which all else is strictly subordinate. Minor subjects have no place in any art except as heightening the central effect by means of illustration or contrast. Now, Shakspeare often sins in this matter, while Racine never does. And it is one of real importance. Let the *Electra* of Sophocles, for instance, be read at the same time as *Antony and Cleopatra*, and no one who has kept himself 'on this side idolatry' about Shakspeare will deny that his art has no chance beside that of Sophocles. In the *Electra* the reader's attention is never diverted from the business of the play and the people who carry it on. The interest is unflagging, because the unity is sustained. In *Antony and Cleopatra*, on the other hand, we are lost in an incoherent crowd of miscellaneous nobodies, for whose very identity we must be constantly turning back to the list of *dramatis personæ*. This does not happen, it is true, in Shakspeare's greatest tragedies; in fact, they would not be so great if it did. But

that it is possible for it to happen at all is as serious a drawback to his art as a whole, as the total impossibility of anything of the kind in Racine's scheme is a real and serious advantage to the French poet. So far Racine really belongs to the company of the great classics and Shakspeare does not. But if we go further? Even in another technical question, that of metre, what can be less like the ease and freedom of the iambic of Sophocles, the mobility of the Homeric hexameter, the subtle and exquisite harmonies of Virgil, than the monotonous beat of the rhymed couplet of Racine? Is it not obvious that as soon as Shakspeare had accepted Marlowe's blank verse as also his, his to develop and perfect, he was in possession of a metre which is as essentially like the great metres of antiquity as the rhymed couplet, whether French or English, is unlike them? The English blank verse, like the hexameter of Homer, has the myriad lights and motions of the sea. Nothing less can give the infinite variety of human life. Everything can be got into it, the lazy serenity of life's summer days, its true peace and its treacherous, the sweep and fury of its storms, the heavy groaning of its after groundswell. What chance does a rhymed couplet, even managed with all Racine's ingenuity, stand by the side of this? The sea itself would lose all its charm if its waves broke always in pairs of equal sound and weight.

The truth is surely that there is a particular purpose for which the rhymed couplet is an admirable metre, indeed the best of all. But that purpose is neither the epic nor the drama. How is it that



we read Pope's *Satires*, and Dryden's, and Johnson's, with enthusiasm still, while we never touch *Irene* and rarely the *Conquest of Granada*? How is it that Molière is a poet of all the world, Racine only of the French? Is it not because the metre lives where it is in essential harmony with the poet's subject? The business of satire is wit and point and epigram. There never was a metre which lent itself to this business as Pope's couplet does. The original iambus invented for purposes of satire can never have been comparable with it. A very poor point passes for an epigram when helped out by the rhyme; while real poetry set into that metre is too often lost sight of in the glitter of the couplet.

In this matter of metre, then, it is not with Racine but with Shakspeare that the affinity to the classics lies. And when we pass from technical questions to the spiritual part of poetry the English poet has a still clearer advantage. The distinguishing mark of the classical poet, ancient or modern, is that he gives us the impression of being on such an eminence as that his vision takes in the whole of life. His treatment of his theme suggests a wider outlook over life's variety, a deeper sympathy penetrating further into life's secret places, above all a more fundamentally poetic conception of what life means than lesser men, even genuine poets, can attain. In a word, his view of humanity is wide, intimate, poetic. Will any Frenchman be found to say that it is prejudice which asserts that Racine's view of the world is not wide, as Homer's, Goethe's, Shakspeare's, is not intimate as theirs is, is not poetic as theirs? Is it very bold to say that his outlook is

that of a court, his depth that of society, the 'subtle heightening' which he applies to his subject that of rhetoric rather than that of poetry? One opens Dante and finds everywhere such things as :

Esce di mano a lui che la vagheggia,  
Prima che sia, a guisa di fanciulla,  
Che piangendo e ridendo pargoleggia,  
L'anima semplicità, che sa nulla,  
Salvo che, mossa da lieto fattore,  
Volentier torna a ciò che la trastulla.

One opens Goethe almost at random and comes upon :

Dem Herrlichsten, was auch der Geist empfangen,  
Drängt immer fremd und fremder Stoff sich an :  
Wenn wir zum Guten dieser Welt gelangen,  
Dann heisst das Bessere Trug und Wahn.  
Die uns das Leben gaben, herrliche Gefühle,  
Erstarren in dem irdischen Gewühle :

One opens Sophocles and he gives us :

τέαν, Ζεῦ, δύνασιν τίς ἀνδρῶν ὑπερβασία κατάσχοι ;  
τὰν οὐθ' ὕπνος αἰρεῖ ποθ' ὁ πᾶντ' ἀγρεύων,  
οὔτε θεῶν ἀκάματοι μῆνες, ἀγῆρως δὲ χρόνον  
δυνάστας κατέχεις 'Ολύμπου μαρμαρόεσσαν αἶγλαν.

When does Racine look down on life from such heights as these? Every one knows his level :

Les dieux sont de nos jours les maîtres souverains :  
Mais, Seigneur, notre gloire est dans nos propres mains.  
Pourquoi nous tourmenter de leurs ordres suprêmes?  
Ne songeons qu'à nous rendre immortels comme eux-mêmes.

How far below Goethe that is,—to say nothing of Sophocles and Dante! And if Racine has not the large view of life which belongs to the great men, still less has he their gift of intimate penetration. There is more of the agony of the famous situation at Aulis in one line of the Aeschylean chorus than in all Racine's *Iphigénie* :

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βαρεῖα μὲν κήρ τὸ μὴ πιθέσθαι,  
βαρεῖα δ', εἰ τέκνον δαίξω, δόμων ἄγαλμα.

Who that has read them can ever forget those fifty lines of incomparable beauty and pathos? Racine's heroine has a touching speech put into her mouth, and is, in her way, a moving figure; but by the side of the victim-daughter of the Greek chorus we simply do not know her.

I spoke just now of the common French parallel between Racine and Virgil. That parallel will not really bear examination from any point of view. It is as certain, for example, that Virgil, the poet of

*Stat sua cuique dies, breve et irreparabile tempus,*

or of

*Di quibus imperium est animarum, umbræque silentes,  
Et Chaos et Phlegethon, loca nocte tacentia late,*

has the large conception of the world as that Racine has not. But there is perhaps nothing in which the superiority of the Roman poet is so clear as in this second point of intimate penetrating sympathy with his subject. Racine has no Priam, no Dido, no Pallas, no Euryalus, no Camilla. The presence of this in the one man and its absence in the other comes out, too, in a point which may almost be called a technical one. 'L'épithète rare, voilà la marque de l'écrivain,' said the De Goncourts. It is above all things the mark of this intimate ear for the secret of things of which we are speaking. Indeed, when we extend it, as Sainte-Beuve does, and say 'le mot rare,' the verb or the substantive as well as the adjective, its presence or absence is an infallible test of the possession of this gift or the lack

of it. The man who has been below the surface of men and things has seen objects and actions as well as qualities of which others know nothing. Hence the element of surprise, of strangeness, for ever present in all great literature. Now, there is no celebrated poetry in all the world which has so little of this quality as the classical French poetry. There is not one word in a page, in many pages perhaps, which stops us and gives our imagination something to please itself with. Quote to a French critic of the old school the least daring of metaphors from a modern poet, and he will say 'Cela n'est pas français,' 'On ne peut pas dire cela.' He will relish a brave flight in Pindar or Æschylus, if he is a scholar; but he forbids such things in his native tongue. Indeed, he will be slow to see that what he condemns in French is exactly what he enjoys in Pindar. The fact is, he still has Boileau's clog on his wings. He hears the perfect mechanism of the Alexandrine and hears nothing else. His satisfied ear listens to the admirable verse without a thought of its poetic poverty. And this is the verse which is compared with that of Virgil—Virgil, whose felicity of single words and phrases has always been the wonder and delight of his readers! Take the page at which our *Æneid* already lies open:

Ibant obscuri sola sub nocte per umbram,  
Perque domos Ditis vacuas et inania regna :  
Quale per incertam lunam sub luce maligna,—

Is there a single epithet which is not rare, specially sought out, that is, for its special work and place, which does not tell on the imagination, which has not something of its own to say? The result is a

general impression of sympathy, intense and sustained, between the poet and his subject; he is in the heart of it, not on the surface. Now, take Racine, Racine at his very highest :

Fille d'Agamemnon, c'est moi qui, la première,  
Seigneur, vous appelaï de ce doux nom de père.  
C'est moi qui, si longtemps le plaisir de vos yeux,  
Vous ai fait de ce nom remercier les dieux ;  
Et pour qui, tant de fois prodiguant vos caresses,  
Vous n'avez point du sang dédaigné les faiblesses.

The lines are instinct with an emotional beauty rare in Racine; they are far more felt, far more *vécu*, as the phrase is, than the bulk of his verse; but it is cruel to place them by the side of Virgil. In the one poet, and not in the other, there is just the note of distinction, intensity, originality, profundity, which belongs only to the greatest men and makes the rest seem flat and shallow in their presence. There are no 'sunt lacrimæ rerum,' no 'amica silentia lunæ,' in Racine. If it be said, then, as it sometimes is, that to dethrone Racine involves the dethroning of Virgil, the answer is that, even if it be admitted that Virgil is not a great creator in the field of character and action, he has other claims which ensure him the highest place. He stands nearly alone in the brooding depth and tenderness of his sympathy; he stands quite alone as the greatest master of language that has ever lived. It ought not to be forgotten that if we miss a great deal in passing from Homer to Virgil, it is also true that a man who goes fresh from the *Æneid* to the *Iliad* will acutely feel the want of some of the things he most enjoyed in Virgil.

The fact is that Racine's style, so often compared with the classical style, and said to produce, as that

so often does the effect of fine sculpture, has only the most superficial resemblance to the great manner of writing. People who do not understand sculpture find the great sculptors cold. They are, in fact, severe, which is as different a thing as possible. And this is really the difference between the classical style, say that of Sophocles or Milton, or, when he chooses, Shakspeare, and the style of Racine. *Andromaque* is cold; *Samson Agonistes* is severe. In Milton one is conscious of great wealth of thought, imagination and emotion, severely moulded into perfect form. The perfect form of which we hear so much in Racine goes little further than mere correctness of language and demeanour. He is never grotesque like Dante, never barbarous and disgusting or fanciful and absurd like Shakspeare, never confused and tiresome like Goethe. These are important negative merits. But the great style demands positive merits. The magic of fine sculpture lies in its suggesting a whole world of thought and beauty by means of little more than an outline. It is true that the essence of severity is self-restraint; but where is the line of Racine which gives the suggestion, given by hundreds of lines in Dante and Shakspeare, of a wealth of matter held in because supreme art knows that it is often a more moving thing to suggest than to say?

The third quality which we took as characteristic of the greatest poetry was a fundamentally poetic conception of what life means. Not a merely logical one, that is, nor a rhetorical one; still less a commonplace one. Is there much need to discuss this with respect to Racine? It must be remembered that we

are considering his claim to rank with the very highest men. Is it not plain that his accomplishment is not the new creation of life by the imagination's help which is that of the great poets, but the working up into pointed form of the common conceptions of it? What great thought, what new emotion, does the world owe to him? The impression he leaves on the mind is, indeed, a more poetic one than that left by Pope or Juvenal or Lucan, but it is essentially of the same character. He has a grace and a tenderness possessed by none of those poets: but, when all right allowance has been made for these gifts, it remains true that, after reading half a dozen of his plays, we think of him, perhaps as the excellent workman whose verse never falls below a certain level, perhaps as the ingenious rhetorician whose points never fail, but not as the great poet at whose hands the world is born again in beauty.

There are two other points on which a word must be said. One is the almost entire absence of the element of fine surprise in Racine. It is tedious to repeat comparisons; but they are the only evidence in these matters. Read a page of Shakspeare, Dante, Æschylus, even Sophocles, and you are almost sure to come on something which makes you feel, 'how strange that he should have thought of that!' New resemblances, new distinctions, new thoughts, above all new pictures, are everywhere in these men. Shakspeare himself has nothing more astonishing than the daring metaphors and similes of Pindar and the Greek choruses. - There is no need to speak of Æschylus. No poet's imagination ever took bolder flight than he does in almost every line, for example,

of the *Agamemnon*. Who will forget the comparison of the Atreidæ to the eagles wheeling over their empty nest, of war to the money-changer whose gold dust is that of human bodies, of Helen to the lion's whelp which a man rears in his house, the delightful, and then the deadly, playmate of his children? Every one knows these. Who will match them among the formal elegances of Racine? And it is a mistake to imagine that this boldness of imagination was not part of the essence of the Greek poetical genius. Sophocles is not so bold as Æschylus; but on one page of the *Trachiniæ*, opened at random, I find the Centaur's curse so personified as to 'contrive deceit,' to 'prick' Hercules with its fatal sting, to involve him 'in a cloud of death'; and on the same page, only five lines away, promises in the course of fulfilment are boldly described as 'coming into harbour before a fair gale.' Yet Sophocles is admittedly among the sanest of poets. Is not this contrast, then, proof that the sanity of the Greeks is one thing, and the sanity of the French quite another? Does not Voltaire's criticism on Corneille, 'Nous ne sommes plus dans un temps où l'on parle à son bras et à son âme,' give eloquent evidence of the prosaic level to which the 'classical' period reduced French poetry? There has never been a great poet who was afraid of such outbursts as Voltaire condemns. Nor will they ever seem anything but perfectly sane and natural where the poet is a man of imagination himself and knows how to fire that of his readers. When Shakspeare puts his most daring figures in the mouth of Lear or Othello we are conscious that we are in a wonderful world



of heightened emotion, interest, beauty ; that is the element of strangeness or surprise in the impression made ; but we are also conscious that in such a world such thought and language is right, is indeed inevitable, and that is the element of perfect sanity which goes with the other. It is this sanity which is that of the Greeks, the sanity of poetry ; that of Voltaire is in truth only the sanity of prose.

The other point to which I alluded may seem a small one ; but I believe it is of real importance. There is no characteristic which belongs more invariably to the man who takes with all his heart and soul the poetic view of life than his love of all the sights and sounds of Nature. He will delight in the open air. He will have a quicker eye than other men for all that goes on in it—its ever changing experiences of life and death, rest and motion, light and darkness, silence and sound. The trees and the birds, the dawn and the twilight, land and sea, have they not all their most loving, most observant chroniclers in Homer, in Dante, in Shakspeare? The greatest poets are all alike in that. They never lose their consciousness that the human drama they describe is played on the most beautiful of all stages. Neither Achilles nor Æneas, neither the love of Romeo nor the death of Duncan, not Milton's Hell nor even Dante's Paradise, ever takes poet or reader quite away from the felt presence of this earth, which no stiffness of Puritanism could prevent Milton from calling 'delightful.' 'This delightful land'! How much does Racine know of its delightfulness? Is he so much as aware that the sun rises and sets in

a glory of colour, that the wind plays deliciously on human cheeks, that the human ear will never have enough of the music of the sea? He might have written every page of his work without so much as looking out of the window of his study. And Corneille, who comes so much nearer the 'large utterance' of the greatest men than Racine ever does, Corneille is as careless and unconscious of the existence of nature as Racine or Boileau himself! Read the *Cid*, and you will find that nature appears but twice, and then for a strictly practical purpose, to afford first the necessary darkness for the Cid's ambushade, and then the necessary daylight for the final rout of the Moors. There is no sign that the poet lingers with any pleasure over either starlight or the dawn. They are there to do their duty, and they do no more. That is not like the poets of 'Ὡς δ' ὅτ' ἐν οὐρανῷ ἄστρο φαεινὴν ἀμφὶ σελήνην' and 'Quale per incertam lunam' and 'Quale ne' plenilunii sereni' and 'Like one that had been led astray Through the heaven's wide pathless way.' The tone of the French poets, one cannot but repeat, is that of men who have felt strongly the rhetorical and dramatic possibilities offered by human life; the tone of the others suggests a dreaming sensitiveness quick to find an infinity of poetry all around it in the world.

These, then, are some of the defects which English lovers of poetry find in the great French dramatists, and to a greater or less extent in all French poetry produced under the literary influences dominant in France during the age of Louis XIV. I have spoken chiefly of Racine, because he is most

often claimed as their world-poet by believers in the French classical tradition, and because he is, in any case, the high-priest and standard-bearer of that tradition. If these defects exclude him from the highest place we need not consider others. There is, indeed, one still greater name, that of Molière. But, indisputable as his greatness is, it hardly affects the present argument. For, boundless as his dramatic gift and his knowledge of human life are, supreme genius as he is in his own field, he is scarcely the man to make us think of French poetry as we think of Sophocles or Milton. For the truth is that, of all that he was, the poet is the least conspicuous and least important part. Indeed, the most striking proof he has given of a turn for poetry may perhaps be found, not in any lines of his own, but in the pleasure he evidently took in introducing 'Si le roi m'avait donné' into *Le Misanthrope*. Molière is the greatest man who has written French verse; but that is not the same thing as saying that he is the greatest French poet. We read him, indeed, with boundless astonishment, with unmeasured and unfailing delight, but the delight and astonishment are not those peculiar to poetry. It is the essence of his genius to be the incarnation of common sense, the very thing which it is the essence of poetry to transcend. It is not surprising, therefore, that a love of Molière has not commonly led to any very exalted faith in the great qualities of French poetry.

We go back, then, to Racine. If we put aside Molière as a master of the human comedy, perhaps the greatest of all, but not an especially great poet,

if we put aside Hugo as too near us for safe judgment, Racine remains. If any one is to represent France in the temple of poetry as Virgil represents Rome, as Dante represents Italy, it must be Racine. So far the world agrees with France. Wherever Europe gathers her poets together to honour them, Racine comes to stand for France, as surely as Shakspeare and Milton for England, or Goethe for Germany. Others may be with him, Molière may even be preferred before him by those who confuse great writers with great poets; but no one is so certain to be there as he. Alike among Frenchmen and foreigners, his work is still the officially accepted highest flight of the French poetic genius. The world has laughed with Molière and loved him; but, so far as it looks to France for the peculiar inspiration, the stir of the soul, which it associates with great poetry, it still turns by habit and authority to Racine and Corneille. It is true that their authority is no longer what it once was. Romantics, Parnassians, Symbolists, have one after another defied it and turned aside from it in a greater or less degree. But the great tradition established by that authority is still the largest outstanding fact in the literary history of France. The common opinion of the world still takes the two great dramatists as the master-poets of France, and their work as the type of French poetry. That being so, it seemed worth while to ask whether these poets can really sustain the claim to rank with such men as Dante and Shakspeare and the great Greeks, or whether the English reluctance to admit that claim has anything serious to say for

itself. Such answer as I could give to these questions has been given. But it is one thing to confess to a substantial agreement with the traditional English attitude about Racine, and to give reasons for thinking that attitude more than a mere prejudice: it is quite another to allow a just impatience at extravagant claims set up on behalf of the poets of *Athalie* and *Le Cid* to pass into a general neglect of French poetry. We have been far too apt to assume we should find nothing in French verse because we have not found what we were promised in the classical dramatists. Disliking them, we have been content to ignore the fine things that went before them, the great things that have come after them. In this way, the very names the French have put before us as their poetic representatives have stood in the way of the formation of a taste for French poetry. To explain how this situation came about, and to get the resulting obstacle out of the way, seems the first step to be taken by one who believes that there are many things to be found in that poetry which no catholic lover of poetry can afford to ignore. Is it unreasonable to hope that after giving a frank account to ourselves of the reasons why we cannot feel what Frenchmen have commonly felt about the great men of the seventeenth century, we shall be not less but more capable of appreciating the charm of other French poets before and since? It is surely time that a distaste for the rhetoric of Racine no longer kept Englishmen from enjoying such things as the lightning flash of Villon's pathos, Marot's ease and humour, Ronsard's grand air as of a poetic conse-

cration, the exquisite dreaming of Chénier or La Fontaine, Heredia's incomparable mastery of style, Victor Hugo's fine ear for the music of the universe. That, at least, is the plea which this book is written to urge.

MAROT

## MAROT

ALL through French literature there run two very opposite streams of tendency. They are the counterparts of two very opposite traits which have always been conspicuous in the character of the French nation, representing in fact two spirits which for ever struggle for the mastery in France. On the one side is the spirit which takes everything seriously, and most of all itself, and on the other there is the spirit which takes everything mockingly and, again, most of all itself. The one is the *esprit gaulois*, the other is the temper of the Grand Monarque and the Grand Siècle. But there are no time limits to either. The self-conscious posturing of Louis XIV., of Corneille and Racine and Bossuet, did not die with them, as Chateaubriand and Victor Hugo, to name only the two greatest modern masters of the manner, are there to prove. And the old-world, almost mediæval, look of the word *gaulois* must not make us think that either Ronsard in his way, or Malherbe in his, or even Louis XIV. in his, could drive the mocking spirit out of the French nation or even out of its poetry. All the world knows the laughter of Molière; and, as for La Fontaine, he laughs incessantly at himself, a delightful accomplishment without which no human being can be made perfect in agreeableness.



But he gives a greater proof of the vitality of the *esprit gaulois* in him. There was little difficulty and no danger in enjoying himself at his own expense: but he goes much further. He constantly gives himself the dangerous pleasure of a laugh at the master of Versailles who did not appreciate being laughed at. And if La Fontaine laughed at himself and Louis XIV., Voltaire laughed at all things and persons, kings and churches, books and institutions, everything, perhaps, except himself. Then followed, it is true, the Revolution, which was no laughing time—though Beaumarchais had a good deal to do with setting it going—and the Romantics, who were anything but a laughing family. But even the tears of *Le Lac* and *Les Contemplations* could not quite drown the laugh of Béranger; and down to our own day the progress of French poesy, however triumphal and however tragic in the main streets, has always been accompanied by a comment of mocking laughter from the side alleys.

But of course in poetry the *esprit gaulois* is at a disadvantage. The spirit which smiles and the spirit which accomplishes great things are very rarely the same. Indeed, humour is perhaps incompatible with all achievement of the very highest order. None of the founders of the great religions, none of the very greatest men of action, none of the supreme poets or artists, were humorous men. Probably neither Mahomet nor St. Paul, neither Alexander nor Napoleon, neither Dante nor Milton, neither Phidias nor Michael Angelo, could have done what they did if they had been capable for a moment of seeing themselves in a ridiculous

light. To do these supremely great things it is necessary to believe that one is a supremely great person. There is Shakspeare, of course, the exception to all rules: but no rule is disproved by the fact that he can be quoted against it. For your ordinary great man the case is clear. We dare not laugh at him: and though we may feel him a little inhuman as he is, we hardly wish him to be different: it would shock us a little if the demigod could so far doubt his divinity as to laugh at himself. But with lesser men it is, of course, the other way. If we do not think Corneille or Racine really demigods, the fact that they assumed we should think so is a drawback to such appreciation of them as we otherwise should have. And in such a case as Hugo's, to like him at all it is almost necessary to worship him. But when we come to smaller men, men whom we are not to worship but enjoy, how delightful it is to find in them this most companionable of all things, the gift of humour! It is easier to love Lamb or FitzGerald than it is to love Shelley or Wordsworth; and if we can find La Fontaine among the shades we shall not leave him to talk to Bossuet. That is, in our ordinary moments. We can visit the heights, and when we are there we can scorn the plains: we can know well that the air of the heights is finer, and purer, and we can resolve to go back to it more and more often, and accustom our weak hearts and heads to its overpowering strength: but we know that so long as we are human beings, with very urgent and obvious bodies, we must live mainly on the common air of the plain. For that purpose we want a literature of the

plain, and we rejoice, and are justified in rejoicing, when that literature can share our laughter as well as our tears.

Of this literature of the plain one of the earliest and one of the finest examples is the poetry of Clément Marot. Marot is a man with many claims to interest. To begin with, life brought him into contact with many interesting people. Among them there are, of course, plenty of scholars and men of letters, beginning with his father, from whom he inherited his craft of poetry, and including Rabelais and Dolet, the great printer, with a host of reforming students ending not very comfortably in Beza and Calvin. There are also royal personages innumerable and among the most interesting who have ever occupied the European stage; Francis I. and his wonderful sister Margaret of Valois, the patron of learning and the friend of those early Huguenots who had yet to learn that Huguenot and Catholic could not be made to be the same thing; Renée of Ferrara, the daughter of Louis XII., who learnt it a little from her husband; and Anne Boleyn, who accidentally taught something like it to the whole church and realm of England. Then he lived at the right moment for being interesting, having been born in 1495 or 1497 and dying in 1544, so that his life covers about the greatest half century the world has ever known. And he was, in his way, thoroughly in it and of it. He was present at the battle of Pavia, the most famous of its battles, where, like his master, Francis I., he was wounded and taken prisoner. But the least interesting thing

that intelligent century did was its fighting. The best of its life went into the finer and longer-lived activities which we vaguely class under the two great names of the Renaissance and the Reformation. In both of them Marot played his part, a more conspicuous part than he played at Pavia, though, so far as the Reformation is concerned, it ended in the same way, or indeed, in a worse; for the prisoner of the Inquisition did not escape as quickly or as lightly as the prisoner of Pavia. No doubt the reason is not far to seek. The king's *valet de chambre* was not nearly so dangerous an enemy to the soldiers of Charles v. as the free-speaking and free-laughing poet was to the soldiers of the Pope. Both accidents were in any case interesting experiences—to look back upon; and they help to make their hero free of the company of the select spirits of his age.

But, whatever other interest there may be about a poet, it is by his poetry that he lives. And Marot lives as the first Frenchman who gave poetic utterance to the intellectual daylight of good sense which dawned upon the world with the Renaissance. He counts, more or less, as a Huguenot: and suffered several disagreeable things, such as exile and imprisonment, on account of his supposed heresies: and I think his sympathy with religious reform was quite genuine in its way. But he really belongs to that earlier stage of the movement when the spirit that made both the Reformation and the Renaissance was as yet conscious only of its own unity and knew nothing of the very different paths its children would take. For the moment all was hope

and promise: the daylight of reason rising against the darkness of ecclesiastical tradition and the vain repetitions of the schools: faith in the human intellect and faith in the human character: delight in a beautiful world, and belief in a rational world: the whole new conception of intelligence and order breaking in upon the incoherent stupidity of the Middle Ages. The first literary result of that spirit was necessarily a feeling that all the earlier literature was at once barbarous and false. The new demand for beauty, the new sense of style, made the old clumsiness painfully conspicuous: the new belief in life and freedom, the new willingness for a man to be himself, the new desire to see things as they really were, called for a naturalness of thought and speech beside which all the old books seemed unreal and artificial. It is true of course that this return to reason and nature, like every other, like that of Rousseau and the Romantics three centuries later, very soon developed an artificiality and unreason of its own. To us now, as we look back upon it all, Chaucer is a more natural poet than Spenser, than all the Elizabethans except one, and that one is far from always an exception. And so in French. Villon's moments of genius are the most supremely natural things French literature has ever known. But, though no generation of human beings has ever been as unlike its predecessor as it thinks, still the world does progress, and no exceptions alter the fact that the literature of the sixteenth century was a great advance on that of the Middle Ages both in beauty and in truth. And the first man who gave conspicuous proof of that in poetry was

precisely Clément Marot. He is not a genius: but he was ideally fitted for doing one half of the literary work of the Renaissance. In the history of art beauty almost always precedes truth: but here there is an exception, for Marot, the master of naturalness and good sense, comes before Ronsard, the master of the great style. And Ronsard is an altogether greater man. Marot is no prophet with a mission, no high priest of a religion of beauty. What he is is what perhaps France had never had before, a man of letters who wrote as the natural occupation of his life, so naturally indeed that all he was and did became literature in his hands, and he was never more entirely himself than when he was writing verse. The greatness of his achievement may be measured by the fact that, in that particular quality, his work remains unsurpassed and perhaps unequalled in French verse down to this moment. Writing poetry is as a rule a difficult thing of rare moments, in which a man finds, perhaps, his truest self but not the self his friends know and love and laugh at. It was this last very human self that Marot set so easily and smilingly upon his paper, and in that accomplishment he stands alone. Even La Fontaine, so like him in so many ways, so much greater, so much more a poet in nearly all ways, does not surpass him in this particular gift. Marot has none of La Fontaine's brooding and dreaming gift of imagination, and not much of his breadth of sympathy, his childlike and primitive simplicity, his immortal felicity of phrase. But not even La Fontaine confesses himself more agreeably in verse, and certainly not more abundantly. Perhaps La

Fontaine—indifferent as he was to public opinion for a man of his day—did feel a little checked in the presence of a world of perukes which was suspicious of persons who removed those appendages. Anyhow Marot had no such difficulties. Nearer in time to the original *esprit gaulois* than La Fontaine, he lived at that delightful moment when the echoes of the old laughter were not yet forgotten and before the new learning and the new reason had begun to take themselves too seriously. Hence he can say things, even to kings, which seem absolutely modern in their directness and sincerity, and he laughs as men can only laugh in a world where pedants have gone out of fashion and perukes not yet come in. The result of all which is that, though neither a great man nor a very great poet, he is one of the pleasantest poets in the whole Parnassus of France.

In that direction no doubt lies his one supreme claim to remembrance. He is, as an early critic said of him, *inimitable en certaines félicités*. His great gift is that strange one, very rare in any literature, by which the poet can say anything he pleases, and say it apparently in the most natural, ordinary, obvious language, and leave us at the end asking ourselves in delighted surprise how it can be that all this every-day talk has suddenly become poetry! Here are our own words, as it seems; just what we should have said if we had been there: and yet this is a poem; and we are not poets! And the oddest thing of all is that he is most absolutely natural exactly where the rest of us are the very reverse. People who talk or

write to kings very rarely manage to get altogether free of the suggestions of court uniform. But Marot's motions are never so exquisitely easy as when he is writing to François I. He may almost be said to saunter into the royal presence in a dressing-gown, an artist's dressing-gown, of course, of graceful folds, and pleasant colours, but still the easiest and least conventional garment in the world. Hear him in the incomparable letter he sent Francis from his Paris prison : there are not ten easier things in all the world. It is a pity that the archaisms of phrase and spelling (which it seems best to retain almost entire, as some of them could not be modernised without destroying the verse) make a momentary difficulty for those who are not accustomed to them : but it is only momentary except to those who let themselves be frightened by it. Indeed the humour of the letter soon makes us too much at ease to be frightened by anything. The poet had been arrested by *trois grands pendants* on a charge of helping another prisoner to resist : a charge which he denied : for, as he characteristically says—

Si j'eusse dict ouy

Que le plus sourd d'entre eulx m'eust bien ouy.

Ecclesiastical accusers, in those days, never failed to hear a heretic's confessions ! But let him tell his own story. This is how he begins—

Roy des François, plein de toutes bontez,  
Quinze jours a, je les ay bien comptez,  
Et dès demain seront justement seize,  
Que je fuz faict confrère au diocèse  
De saint Marry,<sup>1</sup> en l'église saint Pris.  
Si vous diray comment je fuz surpris :  
Et me desplaist qu'il fault que je le dye.

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<sup>1</sup> Marri=unhappy, as Pris is, of course, taken a prisoner.



And so he tells of the *trois grands pendards* and the arrest, at which, says he—

qui fut bien estonné  
Ce fut Marot, plus que s'il eust tonné.  
Puis m'ont montré ung parchemin escript  
Où il n'avoit seul mot de Jesuchrist :  
Il ne parloit tout que de playderie,  
De conseilliers, et d'emprisonnerie.

He makes his vain protests, but such gentry are not easily turned out of their way: and he has to go with them. And he is just enough to recognise that it is their function to do these disagreeable things: the person he is angriest with is his own lawyer.

Et toutes foyz, j'ay plus grand appétit  
De pardonner à leur folle fureur  
Qu'à celle là de mon beau procureur.  
Que male mort les deux jambes luy casse !  
Il a bien prins de moy une bécasse,  
Une perdrix et ung levraut aussi :  
Et toutes foyz je suis encore ici !

However, that does not matter, for the affair is now in the king's hands. And he advises the king, who like himself (and La Fontaine) knows nothing less amusing than a lawsuit, to drop the affair: or, if the prisoner cannot be let off without a fine, why should not the king lend him the money to pay it?

Mais le droit point où je me réconforte,  
Vous n'entendez procès non plus que moy :  
Ne plaidons point, ce n'est que tout esmoy.  
Je vous en croy, si je vous ay mesfait.  
Encor, posé le cas que l'eusse fait,  
Au pis aller n'escherroit qu'une amende.  
Prenez le cas que je la vous demande,

Je prens le cas que vous me la donnez :  
 Et si plaideurs furent onc estonnez  
 Meulx que ceulx-cy<sup>1</sup> je veulx qu'on me délivre,  
 Et que soubdain en ma place on les livre.

Who beats Marot in this kind of Aristophanic *παρὰ προσδοκίαν*, as we used to call it at school? 'If I am wrong . . . take me out of prison and put my enemies in my place!' Then at last comes one whisper of the courtier: but it is the free *esprit gaulois* that has the final word of all.

Très humblement requerrant vostre grace  
 De pardonner à ma très grande audace  
 D'avoir empris ce sot escript vous faire :  
 Et m'excusez, si pour le mien affaire  
 Je ne suis point vers vous allé parler ;  
 Je n'ay pas eu le loisir d'y aller.

How very human every word of it is, instinct with flesh and blood, alive with the actuality of a most genuine son of Adam, whom we recognise at once as of our own stock, whose very voice we seem to hear and could fancy it is one we have often heard before! This and another of the letters addressed to the king are perhaps the best examples, though the best among many, of Marot's incomparable ease. The other is that in which he tells the story of his being robbed by his servant and of an illness which followed that catastrophe. But illness and poverty have no more power than imprisonment to rob him of his humour. *Cantat vacuus*, whatever disasters come upon him: his verse flows along with the sunny lucidity, the perennial constancy, the babbling laughter of a mountain brook. Even when he

<sup>1</sup> Héricault absurdly says that *ceulx-cy* refers to Francis and Marot: but of course it refers to the original prosecutors.

is talking of the rascal who had robbed him, his wrath soon dissolves into a good-natured smile.

J'avois un jour un valet de Gascongne  
Gourmand, ivrongne, et assure menteur,  
Pipeur, larron, jureur, blasphemateur,  
Sentant la hart de cent pas à la ronde,  
Au demourant, le meilleur filz du monde :

This worthy, says the poet, having got wind of a present his master had had from the king, quitted his bed before his usual hour, transferred the money from Marot's pockets to his own, and finally arrayed himself at the expense of the poet's wardrobe.

Si justement, qu'à le veoir ainsi estre,  
Vous l'eussiez prins, en plein jour, pour son maistre.

And then—

Finablement, de ma chambre il s'en va  
Droict à l'estable, où deux chevaulx trouva ;  
Laisse le pire, et sur le meilleur monte,  
Pique et s'en va. Pour abreger le compte,  
Soyez certain qu'au partir du dict lieu  
N'oublia rien fors qu'à me dire adieu

And so he goes off, with a suggestion of the hangman's cord tickling his neck, no doubt ;

Ainsi s'en va, chatouilleux de la gorge,  
Le dict vallet, monté comme un saint Georges,  
Et vous laissa Monsieur dormir son soul  
Qui au resveil n'eust sceu finer d'un soul.  
Ce Monsieur là (Syre) c'estoit moy mesme  
Qui, sans mentir, fuz au matin bien blesme,  
Quand je me vey sans honneste vesture,  
Et fort fasché de perdre ma monture.  
Mais de l'argent que vous m'aviez donné  
Je ne fuz point de le perdre estonné ;  
Car vostre argent (très débonnaire Prince)  
Sans point de faulte est subject à la pince.

The story ends with this very *gaulois* touch, but not so his misfortunes ; for, as he goes on to say, he next fell a victim to a *longue et lourde maladie*, the result of which is that all the money his thievish man had left him was long since gone in drugs and potions. Nevertheless he is not writing to ask for any present, only—and here is the unique Marot again—

Je ne dy pas, si voulez rien prester  
Que ne le prenne.

Of course, if you are bent on lending me something, I will not refuse to oblige you ;

Il n'est point de presteur  
(S'il veust prester) qui ne face un débiteur.

And if so, he will give a most formal receipt and fix the day of payment :

Je vous feray une belle cedula  
A vous payer (sans usure, il s'entend)  
Quand on verra tout le monde content :  
Ou, si voulez, à payer ce sera  
Quand vostre los et renom cessera.

One remembers Fox to the admiring Jew money-lender who would not name a day for his hero to repay him. 'Oh well, if you put it so, shall we say the Judgment Day : or, as that may probably be a busy day, perhaps the day after may be better ?' But Marot's suggestion is far prettier and less profane : indeed it must surely rank among the prettiest compliments ever paid ! And then, as a final stroke, he offers two great personages as his sureties : so that, as he says, the repayment of the king—

Est aussi sur advenant mon trespas  
Comme advenant que je ne meure pas.

Swift once said of Gay that 'Providence never designed him to be above two-and-twenty,' and Marot was a little of Gay's family in that respect. But no one in all the long line of impecunious poets has ever begged himself out of his difficulties with a more irresistible charm than he. Still, it is not only the begging letter of which he is a master. Letters of all sorts form a large section of his work, and he is among the best of the epistolary poets. Far behind Horace in the moral and intellectual stuff of his verse, he is his rival, and perhaps more than his rival, in lightness of touch. His epistles cover very various ground. Some are such things as the famous *Coq à l'Âne* series, where you have satire in its most roystering mood: then again some are formal and complimentary letters to royal and noble personages: some are vigorous assaults upon his literary enemies: one full of capital chaff half buried in Billingsgate is addressed to the 'Dames de Paris': others again describe his flight from France to Ferrara when he bowed before the storm raised over the affair of the heretical *placards*, or pray for leave to return, or, finally, give joyous record of how little he feared the Alps when once he had set his face towards Lyons and France once more: others are pretty society trifles such as that which pays a bet he had lost at some game, in which he cheerfully tells the lady that if the verses are bad, they are no worse than the means her champions took to win them:

- Je l'ay perdue : il faut que je m'acquitte
- En la payant : au fort, me voilà quitte.
- Prenez la donc, l'Épistre que sçavez,
- Et si dedans peu d'éloquence avez,

Si elle est sotte, ou aspre, ou à reprendre,  
 Au composeur ne vous en vueillez prendre ;  
 Prenez vous en aux fascheuses qui prindrent  
 Vostre party, et qui lors entreprindrent  
 De haultement leurs caquetz redoubler  
 Durant le jeu, affin de me troubler ;  
 Prenez vous en à ceulx qui me trompoyent,  
 Et qui mon jeu à tous coups me rompoyent ;  
 Prenez vous en à quatre pour le moins,  
 Qui contre moy furent tous faulx tesmoings ;  
 Prenez vous en à vous mesmes aussi,  
 Qui bien vouliez qu'ilz feissent tous ainsi.  
 Si on ne m'eust troublé de tant de bave,  
 Vous eussiez eu une epistre fort brave,  
 Qui eust parlé des dieux et des déesses,  
 Et des neuf cieulx où sont toutes liesses.  
 Sur ces neuf cieulx je vous eusse eslevée,  
 Et eusse faict une grande levée  
 De rethorique, et non de bouclier :  
 Puis eusse dict comment on oyt crier  
 Au fons d'Enfer, plein de peines et pleurs,  
 Ceulx qui au jeu furent jadis trompeurs.  
 Donnez vous garde. Or brief (sans m'eschauffer)  
 J'eusse descript tout le logis d'Enfer,  
 Là où iront (si brief ne se reduysent)  
 Les vrays trompeurs qui ce monde seduysent.  
 Puis qu'on m'a donc l'esprit mis en mal ayse,  
 Excusez moy si l'Epistre est mauvaïse,  
 Vous assurant, si l'eussiez bien gaignée,  
 Qu'elle eust este (pour vray) bien besognée ;  
 Mais tout ainsi que vous avez gaigné,  
 Par mon serment, ainsi j'ay besogné ;  
 Non qu'à regret ainsi faicte je l'aye,  
 Ne qu'à regret aussi je vous la paye ;  
 Tous mes regrets, toutes mes grans douleurs  
 Viennent (sans plus) de ce que les couleurs  
 N'ay sceu gaigner d'une tant belle dame,  
 A qui Dieu doit repos de corps et d'ame.

The same sort of gift is seen in his epigrams, in which he was the Martial of his age. Many of them are, indeed, translations of his Roman master : but many of the best are still unmistakably French,

and one might say individually Marotic. Here is one to the poet Maurice Séve :

En m'oyant chanter quelques fois  
 Tu te plains qu'estre je ne daigne  
 Musicien, et que ma voix  
 Merite bien que l'on m'enseigne,  
 Voyre, que la peine je preigne  
 D'apprendre : ut, re, my, fa, sol, la.  
 Que diable veulx tu que j'appreigne !  
 Je ne bois que trop sans cela.

And here is one which belongs still more entirely to his age : or one would have said so if pictures of this kind had not been favourite amusements of all the mediæval poets, and if the last lines were not so exactly in the manner of Voltaire :

Un gros prieur son petit filz baisoit  
 Et mignardoit au matin en sa couche,  
 Tandis rostir sa perdrix on faisoit,  
 Se lève, crache, esmeutit et se mouche ;  
 La perdrix vire : au sel de broque en bouche  
 La devora : bien scavoit la science :  
 Puis quand il eut prins sur sa conscience  
 Broc de vin blanc, du meilleur qu'on eslise :  
 ' Mon Dieu, dit il, donne moy patience ;  
 Qu'on a de maulx pour servir sainte Eglise !'

But one prefers to turn to prettier things, and there are plenty of them. The *Beau Tétin* is no doubt the most famous, and, in spite of things we now wish away, is really pretty, besides being a marvel of ingenuity, ease, and lightness, dancing along in the airiest of octosyllabics. But prettier still for our ears, though less original, are some of the love epigrams, at once gay and gracious, a charming mixture of courtliness and humour :

J'ay une lettre entre toutes eslite :  
 J'ayme un pays et ayme une chanson ;  
 N'est la lettre en mon cœur bien escrite,  
 Et le pays est celuy d'Alençon ;  
 La chanson est (sans en dire le son) :  
*Allégez moy, douce plaisant Brunette :*  
 Elle se chante à la vieille façon ;  
 Mais c'est tout un, la Brunette est jeunette.

Or this ; 'if you will not love me, alas for your beauty : it lives or dies with my love' :

Quand je vous aime ardemment  
 Vostre beauté toute autre efface ;  
 Quand je vous ayme froidement,  
 Vostre beauté fond comme glace.  
 Hastez vous de me faire grace,  
 Sans trop user de cruauté :  
 Car si mon amytié se passe,  
 A Dieu command<sup>1</sup> vostre beauté.

Or this, the most Marotic and perhaps the most perfect of all :

Un doux Nenni, avec un doux soubrire,  
 Est tant honneste, il le vous fault apprendre :  
 Quand est d'Ouy, si veniez à le dire,  
 D'avoir trop dict je vouldroys vous reprendre ;  
 Non que je soys ennuyé d'entreprendre  
 D'avoir le fruit dont le desir me point ;  
 Mais je vouldrois qu'en le me laissant prendre  
 Vous me disiez : 'Non, vous ne l'aurez point.'

Nothing more perfect in its small way was ever written : it has the amazing conversational ease of Catullus. And what a humanly pretty little fancy it turns on ! But there are graver touches in the Epigrams. There are the beautiful lines to the Queen of Navarre, which may be only poetry and prettiness, though I cannot but think they are also

<sup>1</sup> *i.e.* good-bye to.



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in part the genuine aspiration of a man who had seen the beauty of innocence but had not lived in the spirit of his vision :

Nous fûmes, comme et serons  
Mort et Malice et Innocence :  
Le pr<sup>e</sup> de mort nous pr<sup>e</sup>ferons ;  
Malice est toujours en presence ;  
Dieu en nostre premiere e<sup>n</sup>ce  
Nous voulut d' Innocence orner ;  
O la mort pleine d'excellence,  
Qui nous y fera retourner.

How much seriousness was there in Marot's religion? It is a point much disputed and I suppose not now easy to decide. Most critics and editors seem to doubt whether his Huguenot leanings came of anything deeper than the old and inevitable enmity between free spirits and the chartered and established dulness of authority. And they point to his not very edifying life and his many most unedifying poems as proof that the translator of the Psalms was not very well fitted for that task. Certainly Marot was no saint, and part of the outcry which drove him into his final exile a year before his death may have been due to perfectly natural indignation at the author of the *Cog à l'Âne* presuming to translate the Bible. But that does not prove that he had not his moments of sincere piety, as other publicans and sinners have had in all ages. For my part the reading of his work as a whole leaves on my mind a strong impression that to regard his religious poems as only the product of an old man's fears or a young man's hypocrisy, and to look upon his expression of Huguenot sympathies as only the natural attitude of a Bohemian free lance

attached to the court of a reforming Princeess, is to make a complete mistake and seriously misread the man. He was not a theologian, of course, any more than he was a saint: and he was a man of mobile, pleasure-loving, volatile temperament. If he made resolutions they were no doubt quickly forgotten: but they may still have been perfectly sincere when made. And the same is true of his religious poems. They appear to have a perfectly genuine ring about them, and, what is equally doubted or denied, a definitely Protestant note. One might ask whether some of those who, like Héricault, have treated his heretical reputation as due merely to his questionable morals and Bohemian temperament, and at any rate not due to any serious religious convictions, have ever read carefully such pieces as *Le Riche en Pauvreté*, *La Complainte d'un Pastoureau Chrestien*, the *Balladin*, which is said to have been his last work, or again, the letter to Francis I. from Ferrara. These are all full of language which can hardly be merely conventional:

O seigneur Dieu, permettez-moi de croire  
 Que réservé m'avez à vostre gloire.  
 Serpens tortus et monstres contrefaits,  
 Certes, sont bien à vostre gloire faits.  
 Puis que n'avez voulu donc condescendre  
 Que ma chair vile ayt esté mise en cendre,  
 Faictes au moins, tant que seray vivant,  
 Que vostre honneur soit ma plume escrivant ;  
 Et si ce corps avez predestiné  
 A estre un jour par flamme terminé,  
 Que ce ne soit au moins pour cause folle,  
 Ainçois pour vous et pour vostre parole :  
 Et vous supply, pere, que le tourment  
 Ne luy soit pas donné si vehement  
 Que l'ame vienne à mettre en oubliance  
 Vous, en qui seul gist toute sa fiance ;

Si que je puisse avant que d'assoupir  
 Vous invocquer jusque au dernier soupir.

That may not be great poetry ; but is it the sort of thing that a man who has never given a serious thought to religion either cares to write or can write ? And, as it seems to me, there is clear evidence, not only that Marot did have genuine thoughts and emotions of his own in religious matters, but that they were thoughts of a particular tendency, namely, the Protestant tendency. The parallel between his language and that of Protestant writers is often very curious. It would not be fair to lay too much stress upon the odd similarity there is between some expressions of his *Pastoureau Chrestien*, a poem addressed to God under the name of Pan, and some phrases in Milton's *Lycidas*. The mere application of the names of Pagan divinities to the Persons of the Christian Trinity, however daring it may seem to us, is, of course, no sign of heresy : for there is the orthodox Dante to answer for it as well as the Independent Milton. But the bitter complaints of the bad shepherds of whom he says that

En lieu d'appaist et bonne nourriture  
 Ilz vont donnant esventée pasture  
 A leurs troupeaux ;

and the outburst against prohibitions of free prayer and preaching,

Ne sont-ce pas deffenses trop estranges  
 De prohiber annoncer tes louanges  
 Parmy les champs, ou en temple sacré,  
 Comme je scay que bien te vient à gré ?

and the poet's own prayer for the divine Shepherd to protect his own poor sheep—

O puissant Pan, de ton hault lieu regarde  
 Ces cas piteux, et à venir ne tarde  
 Donner secours à tes simples brebis  
 Et tes troupeaux errans par les herbis  
 De ces bas lieux, qui sans cesse t'invoquent,  
 Et à pitié et mercie te provoquent—

not only have all the Miltonic temper, however much they may lack of the Miltonic greatness, but, what is more important, an unmistakably Protestant ring about them. And if it be said that others besides Protestants felt the scandal of bad priests, the answer is that we have only to go to the *Balladin* to find Protestant doctrine as well as Protestant indignation. Its theme is the contrast between Christine, true or primitive Christianity, and Symonne, her rival, who had made herself queen of the kings of the world. Christine, born some fifteen hundred years before, conquered the world by her humility, her graces and her labours, but was driven forth 'to the most barbarous parts of Europe' by Symonne, who called herself by great names, though John in his vision had given her a very different title to those she gave herself; and Symonne was the idlest of women, and yet had got possession of three parts of the riches of the world, and persecuted the simple followers of Christine. But now Christine came forth, as fresh and fair as ever, after a thousand years, from her hiding-place 'among the rocks of the Saxons'; and she called upon all, old and young, to come to her and be delivered of their burdens; but only a few would listen: for

Qui veult n'est pas son serviteur fidelle,  
 Voyre, et qui veult n'est pas amoureux d'elle,  
 Pour ce que nul jamais ne peut l'aymer  
 Si non celui qui lui plaist enflammer.

There, we may note, is the favourite Protestant doctrine of Predestination: and it is followed by language of evangelical 'enthusiasm' very characteristic of the feelings of the early Reformers, so many of whom did have to quit home and property and country at the call of their faith. And, as Christine went through Europe, calling her friends who left all to follow her, she came to the river Loire, and there she cast her eyes on the poet of the *Balladin*, looking at him twenty times before his heavy eyes could look up at her; and she called him to awake out of the darkness in which he had slept too long: and all at once, almost in the words of Bunyan's Christian, a hundred and fifty years later, he feels his burden gone, and his heart at ease:

et si sentoïis aller

Hors de mon cueur une pesante charge  
De grief tourmentz, dont me trouviz au large,  
Et au repos de franche liberté  
Où paravant n'avoye jamais esté.

If such language as this does not prove that Marot had real and serious Protestant leanings it is not easy to see what could prove it. Perhaps the evidence of the epistle to Francis from Ferrara, where he boldly claims for himself the right of reading what he pleases, using the Bible as his touchstone of truth and falsity, is still stronger. Indeed in that letter he goes so far as to tell the king that the world is amazed at seeing men of the purest life burned for their opinions at Paris. But the point really needs no labouring. The proof of Marot's Protestantism is abundant for those who will look for it. Of course he did not separate

himself from the Church : speaking broadly, nobody did in his day, especially in France : and anyhow that is not the point. The question is whether the assumption that his religion in general and his Protestantism in particular were hollow and accidental things is well founded or not : and so far as such a question can be answered by the language a man uses—some of it, like the letter from Ferrara, used at very inopportune moments as far as his interest was concerned—I believe that the citations just given, which might easily be multiplied, have answered it.

However, Marot's character is not the thing by which he is remembered now. It is a pleasant piece of loyalty both to truth and to him to say what can be honestly said in his favour and to bring out what has been overlooked. But there we may leave it and go back to his verse, a matter of more enduring interest than any controversies, whether biographical or theological. The best love of literature will always want to honour the poets as well as to enjoy their work : but it will not refuse the second even where it is deprived of the first. And in Marot's case, after all defence has been made, the enjoying is easier than the honouring. His work is defaced by indecency, by lingering relics of mediæval barbarism, by lack of a great subject to handle, and of the great personality which alone could handle it. But much remains. The incomparably easy verse, so humorous, so full of gaiety and pleasant surprises, of which I have already given specimens, is the one kind of poetry, perhaps, where he ranks among the great

masters. Only one or two of his countrymen have at all equalled him in this field: not one could have written the ballad of *Frère Lubin*, which is almost the masterpiece of the *esprit gaulois*.

Pour courir en poste à la ville  
Vingt foys, cent foys, ne sçay combien ;  
Pour faire quelque chose vile,  
Frere Lubin le fera bien ;  
Mais d'avoir honneste entretien,  
Ou mener vie salutaire,  
C'est à faire à un bon chrestien,  
Frere Lubin ne le peult faire.

Pour mettre (comme un homme habile)  
Le bien d'autrui avec le sien,  
Et vous laisser sans croix ne pile,  
Frere Lubin le fera bien :  
On a beau dire, je le tien,  
Et le presser de satisfaire,  
Jamais ne vous en rendra rien,  
Frere Lubin ne le peult faire.

Pour desbaucher par un doux stile  
Quelque fille de bon maintien,  
Point ne fault de vieille subtile,  
Frere Lubin le fera bien.  
Il presche en théologien,  
Mais pour boire de belle eau claire,  
Faictes la boire à vostre chien,  
Frere Lubin ne le peult faire.

*Envoy.*

Pour faire plus tost mal que bien,  
Frere Lubin le fera bien :  
Et si c'est quelque bon affaire,  
Frere Lubin ne le peult faire.

But though this is the unique and quintessential Marot, it is not the whole man. Readers and critics have been too apt to think it is. Underneath it was no common measure of the poet who is said to exist

and die young in all of us. In Marot he did not die young. His growth was checked by poverty on the one side and patronage on the other, by the unformed state of the language he had to write in, by lack of education, by persecution and exile, by the inevitable idleness and emptiness of a life at court. How could great literature be produced by a man who had to follow a court which, as the Venetian ambassador relates, during a period of nearly four years never stayed more than fifteen days at one place! Great work and, more particularly, large work, cannot be done under such conditions. But the poet in Marot was a very real person, and took what chances life gave him. He is the most natural of poets, and the poetry, though never so striking as the naturalness, was there from the beginning. In a pretty eclogue addressed to the king, he gives a charming picture of his boyhood :

Sur le printemps de ma jeunesse folle  
 Je ressemblois l'arondelle qui volle  
 Puis çà, puis là : l'age me conduisoit,  
 Sans peur ne soing, où le cuer me disoit :

Birdnesting, and climbing, and hunting, and swimming, so far it is the common story : but these rural delights in Marot's case concealed or nourished a youthful poet : and so he tells the king in a few lines full of his own sincerity, grace, and lightness of touch.

Desjà pourtant je faisois quelques notes  
 De chant rustique et dessoubz les ormeaux,  
 Quasy enfant, sonnoys des chalumeaux.  
 Si ne sçaurois bien dire ne penser  
 Qui m'enseigna si tost d'y commencer,  
 Ou la nature aux Muses inclinée,  
 Ou ma fortune, en cela destinée



A te servir : si ce ne fust l'un d'eux,  
Je suis certain que ce furent tous deux.

'La nature aux Muses inclinée' is a true word. What could be saved from the pressure of barbarism, the turmoil of controversy, the dreariness of exile, it saved and offered to the goddess of its boyish choice. It is not a great deal, perhaps, but how living and graceful the best of it is!

Adieu la court, adieu les dames,  
Adieu les filles et les femmes,  
Adieu vous dy pour quelque temps ;  
Adieu voz plaisans pasetemps ;  
Adieu le bal, adieu la dance,  
Adieu mesure, adieu cadence,  
Tabourins, haulboys, violons,  
Puisqu'à la guerre nous allons.

It is the business of art to arrest the fleeting spirits of things, seize upon their significant and essential part and give it the form by help of which these passing presences can remain eternally visible to us. These are large words to apply to Marot's charming lines ; but, after all, do not his verses, dancing their delightful measure, and singing with ease and pleasantness as they go, give us an immortal echo of that court of the first Valois which was in some ways the beginning of civilisation north of the Alps? And when he comes back from his exile, with what joyous sincerity and beauty he makes his salutation to king and court and to his beloved France!

Vienne la mort quand bon lui semblera  
Moins que jamais mon cueur en tremblera,  
Puis que de Dieu je reçoys ceste grace  
De voir encor de Monseigneur la face.

Or je vous voy, France, que Dieu vous gard !

His exile at the court of a princess who held him in high honour was indeed briefer and more agreeable than Ovid's. But for a French poet, as Du Bellay and Chénier and Hugo are there to show, to be out of France is punishment enough. And no doubt it was so to Marot, even in those days when, at least for men of letters, nationality had hardly been invented. But even at the worst he was true poet enough to add to his other consolations that high and solitary one to which Ovid owes four of his finest verses.

En ego quum patriâ caream vobisque domoque,  
 Raptaque sint, adimi quae potuere, mihi :  
 Ingenio tamen ipse meo comitorque fruorque.  
 Cæsar in hoc potuit juris habere nihil.

After these stately Roman words it is impossible for Marot to avoid sounding a little naïve, a little helpless, even a little barbarous. But it is unfair to ask of a poet who is making a language that he should write as well as a poet who has inherited one, and Marot's lines have the right ring in them. Indeed, if such parallels were not the most deceptive things in the world, one would fancy that he had had Ovid's lines in his memory as he wrote—

Ne voy tu pas, encores qu'on me voye  
 Privé des biens et estats que j'avoie,  
 Des vieux amys du pays, de leur chere,  
 De ceste Royne et maistresse tant chere,  
 Qui m'a nourry (et si sans rien me rendre  
 On m'a tollu tout ce qui se peut prendre),  
 Ce néantmoins, par mont et par campagne  
 Le mien esprit me suit et m'accompagne ?  
 Malgré fascheux j'en jouy et en use.  
 Abandonné jamais ne m'a la Muse ;  
 Aucun n'a sceu avoir puissance là.  
 Le Roy portoit mon bon droit en cela.

Et tant qu'ouy et nenny se dira,  
Par l'univers le monde me lira.

*Fortunati ambo ! si quid mea carmina possunt !*  
They are a bold race, the poets, but courage is justified of her children. Nisus and Euryalus have lived a thousand years and more beyond the Roman immortality which Virgil promised them : and here is *nenny*, already a piece of antiquity, almost lost out of the French dictionaries, while Marot still has his readers, and some of his poems are in every collection of French verse ! It is true that plenty of dull people in those days, both in France and England, made similar boasts, now discovered only to the greater confusion of their makers ; but Marot's claims for himself have never been seriously disputed. He had the stuff of a poet in him and he knew it. And we know it too, when we read such things as the best of his Rondeaux, where the artist shows his delight in an exquisite form, and the poet, now and then, can give free voice to the poetry that courts are but too apt to freeze or frown into silence ! His great successors of the Pléiade did not produce many things more beautiful than this delightful Rondeau of the *bon vieux temps*.

Au bon vieulx temps un train d'amour regnoit  
Qui sans grand art et dons se dëmenoit  
Si qu'un bouquet donné d'amour profonde,  
C'estoit donné toute la terre ronde,  
Car seulement au cueur on se prenoit.

Et si par cas à jouyr on venoit  
Sçavez-vous bien comme on s'entretenoit ?  
Vingt ans, trente ans ; cela duroit un monde  
Au bon vieulx temps.

Or est perdu ce qu'amour ordonnoit :  
 Rien que pleurs faintz, rien que changes on n'oyt :  
 Qui vouldra donc qu'à aymer je me fonde,  
 Il fault premier que l'amour on refonde,  
 Et qu'on la meine ainsi qu'on la menoit  
 Au bon vieulx temps.

That is perhaps the finest achievement of the poet in Marot. But there are other things that do not come far behind.

Là me tiendray où à present me tien,  
 Car ma maistresse au plaisant entretien  
 M'ayme d'un cueur tant bon et desirable  
 Qu'on me devoit appeller miserable  
 Si mon vouloir estoit autre que sien.

Et fusse Helaine au gracieux maintien,  
 Qui me vinst dire : ' Amy, fais mon cueur tien,'  
 Je respondrois : ' Point ne seray muable ;  
 Là me tiendray.'

Qu'un chascun donc voyse chercher son bien ;  
 Quant est a moy, je me trouve très bien :  
 J'ay dame belle, exquise et honorable ;  
 Parquoy, fusse je unze mille ans durable,  
 Au dieu d'amours ne demanderay rien ;  
 Là me tiendray.

One wishes there was more of this gracious Elizabethan sentiment, as we in England should call it. But no one will pretend that it is the characteristic thing in Marot: any more than real poetry of any kind was characteristic of the great lady who has given her name to so much. The lives both of Elizabeth and of Marot were stony ground for the seed of high poetry to fall on. No one but a real poet could write such things as these two Rondeaux: at the lowest they are exquisite fancies; at the highest they may well be much more, the echo of moments of sincere regret for

possibilities of life and of poetry out of the reach of which, except as beautiful fancies, Marot had been too far swept by the whirl of circumstances and, alas, by the weaknesses of his own character. But the main current of the man's life and art must be looked for elsewhere. The natural man in Marot is the most natural man in all the world, and he lives as a poet because he had the rare secret of making poetry out of his own naturalness. And so, however unforgettable the *bon vieux temps* may be, it is not the sort of thing by which we recall its author. For that we rather turn to the epistles to Francis I., to *Frère Lubin*, to the gay chaff of the ladies of Paris, to such inimitable trifles as the *Oui et Nenni* epigrams, or to such a Rondeau as this :

Dedans Paris, ville jolie,  
Un jour, passant melancolie,  
Je prins alliance nouvelle  
A la plus gaye damoyselle  
Qui soit d'icy en Italie.

D'honnesteté elle est saisie,  
Et croy (selon ma fantasie)  
Qu'il n'en est gueres de plus belle  
Dedans Paris.

Je ne la vous nommeray mye,  
Si non que c'est ma grand'amyé ;  
Car l'alliance se fait telle  
Par un doux baiser que j'eus d'elle,  
Sans penser aucune infamie,  
Dedans Paris.

Paris, indeed, is the right word with which to end a study of Marot. Not that he lived there much, or had much reason to remember gratefully the city of the Sorbonne that was soon to be the city of the League. But Paris, the native city of wit

and gaiety and graceful compliment, is the natural home for the memory of so pleasant a poet. Not the Paris of great ideas and great movements: there he would have been out of place: for the only great ideas he touched were just the only ones Paris never would accept or even understand. His Paris is the sociable, easy-going, easy-living, pleasure-loving Paris, intelligent, and amiable, and intensely alive, which has subsisted through all changes political and religious; and that Paris, the lesser half of France, would at any moment have chosen him as one of her most accredited representatives in the literary parliament of the nations. This particular side of life, in which the world owes so much to Paris and to France, finds one of its earliest and best spokesmen in Marot. Other things for other men: greater things for greater. Marot seems to have had no eyes for the beauty of Nature: he could ride all over France in the perpetual motion of the court, and leave no hint of having had eyes to see anything whatever except the court ladies. And of the splendid literary ambitions, that were to fill such a large space presently, he has nothing at all. The poetry that sees in itself the highest human inspiration, and not far from the highest human achievement, was as much out of his ken as the poetry that stretched beyond humanity to a kinship with Nature, and loved almost with equal love the pathos and beauty of both. But France had not long to wait for these things. Marot died in 1544. The great manifesto of the Pléiade was issued in 1549, and Ronsard's *Odes* appeared in 1550.

PIERRE RONSARD

## PIERRE RONSARD

THERE is no triter theme than that of the uncertainty of fame. A man is the delight and admiration of his contemporaries, graced with every mark of royal favour, honoured alike by the applause of the many and by the sober judgment of the few; and in the next age he is a shadow or a jest. Another dies and only a few friends have any sense of serious loss: but let twenty or fifty years go by, and the 'perfect witness of all-judging' Time grants to Hobbema or Corot honours of which they had never dared to dream, and admits Collins and Chénier to that high company in which no place is found for Gay or for the Abbé Delille. There is a third class, not very numerous, who have experienced another stage of these vicissitudes, and whose fame has known not only life and death but resurrection as well. Of these none has been, in turn, more universally famous, more entirely forgotten, and, at last, more honourably restored to a just measure of his ancient glory, than Pierre Ronsard, Captain of the Pléiade and Prince of Poets, at the courts of the Valois kings. Born in 1525, and dying in 1585, he enjoyed the favour of Francis I., Henry II., Francis II., Charles IX., and Henry III., especially of Charles IX., who delighted in his society and loaded him with pensions and preferments. But the mention of five French sove-



reigns by no means exhausts the list of honours and distinctions he received from the great. Catharine de Médicis defended him from the jealousy of rivals, Margaret of Savoy was his unfailing friend, Elizabeth of England gave him a diamond, Mary of Scotland, even from her prison, found means to send him a magnificent sideboard, Tasso sought his judgment of the *Jerusalem Delivered*, Chastelard, on the scaffold, preferred his *Hymn of Death* to the consolations of Church or confessor. And the poet himself accepted the universal verdict, and proclaimed his acceptance again and again with serene self-assurance. And yet before he had been dead sixty years Balzac was asking Chapelain whether he was serious in speaking of Ronsard as a great poet: and he had scarcely been dead a hundred before it was allowable for the lawgivers of French poetry to sneer at him without reading him. And now, within the last century, his turn has come again, and the editor of the final edition of his works has been able to dedicate it gratefully to the greatest of French critics, who laid the first stone of this restoration, and can preface the life of his poet, in true sixteenth-century fashion, with laudatory verses from such men as Théodore de Banville, François Coppée, and Sully-Prudhomme, as well as from Sainte-Beuve himself.

Such revulsions of taste appear strange at first sight, but in reality they are the most natural thing in the world. There is truth and reason in each, the final truth, we may hope, in what must surely be the final revulsion. The mind of Europe, at the moment of Ronsard's birth, was in the condition of a youthful king just come into possession of his kingdom. All

the voices round him cry in chorus, speaking only of the splendour, and riches, and delights that await him, and, without a single word of warning, call to him to make haste and enter in and possess the good land. The promised land of the age of Francis I. was the New World of Greece and Rome. All things were to become new: the *vieux temps*, always thought of with a half contempt in logical France, was to be altogether put away and forgotten: a new era in art and literature and learning was to dawn forthwith. There is nothing in which Ronsard is more characteristic of his time than in his utter disregard of all that came before him in his native tongue, in his perpetual reiteration of the most daring of themes, *Magnus ab integro saeculorum nascitur ordo*. The literature of the ancients was indeed only half understood, but the half understanding was enough to give men some true, if faint, perception of the qualities that go to make a classic. Filled with an enthusiasm for the new-found masterworks of Greece and Rome, which, if not wholly intelligent, was still not wholly ignorant, they were resolved to equal them in their native French, the infant, as it seemed to them, still in its cradle, born but yesterday of the royal edict which ordered its public and official use. At least they felt that if France was to have a classical literature she must strike out a new path for herself. They were conscious of something in the ancients which could never be reached on the old lines. And in truth the literature, like the life, of the Middle Ages, was always in danger of losing itself, at one moment in the subtleties of the schools, at another in the

inanities of the court, at another in the obscenities of the tavern. To produce a classic it was necessary to quit these bypaths: to walk in the main road of human life, and offer an interpretation of it which could satisfy an intelligence now at last set free and learning to think and judge with all its powers. The Frenchman of Ronsard's day coming from his own old literature to the great writers could not but recognise a humanity, a sanity, a note of good sense and civilisation which was strange to him: more easily still he recognised a largeness of utterance, unheard before, except in a special field and an unknown tongue, through the majestic medium of the Catholic Church. Feeling instinctively that literature of this sort satisfied the demands of the awakened human intellect in a way no mediæval literature could satisfy it, he desired that his own country, too, should possess men of letters who could offer him in his own language the same free and rational criticism of life, and the same elevation of style.

Revolutions are seldom quite conscious of themselves, but this one was as nearly so as such things can be. The demand for change and the definition of the direction it was to take were clearer than usual, and Ronsard, Du Bellay, and their friends set themselves to meet it consciously and deliberately.

Unfortunately the will is not everything in these high matters. It is indeed a thing of the first importance. The man who begins with the determination to do some great thing for the literature of his country has taken the first step towards doing it. When we hear Ronsard proclaiming that 'there is

as much difference between a poet and a versifier as between a hack pony and a high-bred Neapolitan charger, or, to make a better comparison, between a venerable prophet and a travelling quack,' we feel that we are dealing with a man who has the great ambition which must go before great achievement, and in whose voice the trumpet note at least will not be wanting. Style is largely a matter of character, and a man who had so much of the heroic strain in him as Ronsard was sure to find for himself a language by the side of which that of Marot would appear mean. The need of a new largeness of utterance, then, which was one of the two things men felt in the ancients and desired in French, was genuinely, if not completely, satisfied by Ronsard. It was the note which he struck even more than anything he said that secured for him immediately the enthusiastic admiration of his contemporaries. And who will doubt that they were right when he has before him such lines as

Car elle m'a de l'eau de ses fontaines  
Pour prêtre bien baptisé de sa main,  
Me faisant part du haut honneur d'Athènes  
Et du savoir de l'antique Romain?

There is style there, not the style of Pindar or Milton, but still something for which it would be vain to search in Marot, or, one may safely add, in any of Marot's predecessors. His contemporaries were in this way not so altogether wrong in saluting Ronsard as the Virgil, even the Homer, of their age: for it was plain from the first that he possessed, what none of his countrymen had possessed before

him, a real touch of the *os magna soniturum* of the great poets.

Even in this matter of style he could only approach his models from one side. His uncritical verbosity is as unlike as possible to the *curiosa felicitas* of Horace, or to the reserve and dignity which is always felt behind the tenderness and sympathy of Virgil: and there is too much crackling of sparks in his flame for it to be compared with the white glow of Pindar. But if he falls below the ancients in style, he falls below them still further in his mastery of his theme. Indeed the truth is, that it was possible for the men of the Renaissance to envy the sanity and humanity of the great Greeks and Romans; yes, and even to think they could attain to something like it: it was not possible for them really to attain to it. The child is not made a man by the reading of a few books though they be the best. The swaddling-clothes of the Middle Ages could not be thrown off in a moment, and the childishness of verbosity, the childishness of self-importance, the childishness of a servile literalism, remain the witness, in Ronsard's own pages, that the age of manhood was not yet. What can be more completely in the manner of a monastic chronicler than the rebuke administered with perfect seriousness to Virgil in the preface to the *Franciade* for his untruthfulness in making Dido contemporary with Aeneas! One cannot but feel there the remorseless literalism of an intellectual child, as one feels the child's passion for exact imitation in his instruction to his epic poet to clothe his heroes occasionally in skins of lions or bears, and to fortify their courage with

oracles and signs. After all, ripeness is a necessary part of sanity, and that brilliant and delightful world of the Renaissance pays the inevitable penalty for its youthful high spirits and bright colours and adventurous enthusiasms, the penalty of crudity.

And if there is in this way a lack of perfect sanity in the treatment which Ronsard and his contemporaries give to their theme, there is also a lack of humanity, of the power to see human nature as a whole and from all sides, by which the theme itself is necessarily narrowed. We get youthful hopes and youthful fears, love and sorrow and death, and we are touched with sympathy as well as admiration; but a serious interpretation of life, or even a serious conception of what life means at all, such as we do get in different ways from Voltaire and Bossuet, Pope and Johnson, of this there is scarcely a trace. Poetry is as yet at school: and the poets are schoolboys writing exercises on the successes and disappointments that make up their lives. It is exactly the same with our own Elizabethans, if we leave out Spenser and the dramatists. Their lyrics are often beautiful, sometimes exquisite, occasionally perfect: but any one who comes to them with any acquaintance with the great literature of the world as a whole finds in them something rather limited and monotonous. The eternal complaints about the stony-hearted mistress, with their probable insincerity, and certain exaggeration, are as tiresome in Surrey and Watson as they are in Ronsard: and the transitoriness of youth and the spring, and nearly all that is most delightful in the world, though a true and beautiful theme

for poetry, is after all not an inexhaustible one. We turn with relief, from a literature which can only give us a thousand more or less pretty variations on one or two charming airs, to Molière's wide acquaintance with human life and sane and lucid judgment of it, to the wisdom and knowledge of Goethe, to the wisdom and depth of Wordsworth.

Yet, within his own limits and dealing with his own themes, Ronsard is admirable. In his hands French poetry attains a dignity it had never known before. He is, in the first place, almost always a scholar and a gentleman, and rarely descends either to the ribaldry or to the pedantry which had so often disgraced his predecessors. His conception of life, narrow as it seems to us, was large and satisfying to the men of his day, and he wields his weapon with an ease and dignity which have not even now lost their charm. He has neither passion nor originality, but he handles his themes from time to time with a sureness and lightness of touch in the presence of which all defects are forgotten. He complains himself in a rare moment of modesty or depression that he was only a half-poet: and, though he is much more than that, there is some reason for what he says: for he is by temper and ambition far above the versifiers, and yet, in his whole moral and intellectual stature, far below the supreme poets. He has no key to offer either to the speculative mysteries or the practical difficulties of life: but he has, what the mere makers of verses have not, the poet's imagination which sees ordinary things in a light in which they are not seen by ordinary men. There is more of

the craftsman than of the *vates sacer* in him: but his craftsmanship is of that generous and enthusiastic order of which the very highest need not disdain to be companions. For all these reasons, and not merely for the interest of his historical position, he deserves to be much better known than he is. Half the prejudice which exists in England against French poetry is due to the belief that the stilted rhetoric which fills so much of it fills the whole. A good selection from the work of Ronsard and his friends would do much to dispel this mistake. There is, indeed, rhetoric enough in the men of the *Pléiade*: but it is the rhetoric of poetry, not, like the other, that of prose. And how much else there would be in such a selection of what we value most in poetry! There the lover of our own Elizabethans would find something of the charm which secures forgiveness for their conceits, something of their power of rich and splendid utterance, much of their fine enthusiasm for knowledge, and of that love of beauty, in all its forms, in man and art and nature, whose genuineness shines clear through all the mist of affectation which surrounds it. This is not the place to make such a selection, but one may quote freely of a poet so little read in England: and hope that those who care at all for these things may go on to make a larger selection for themselves.<sup>1</sup>

And, first of all, there are two things which no one who ever wrote about Ronsard could refrain from quoting. Both are on the eternal Renaissance theme:

<sup>1</sup> Since this was written Mr. George Wyndham's charming volume *Ronsard and La Pléiade* has given the English reader almost exactly the book for which I was asking.



'Gather ye rosebuds while ye may,' 'Golden lads and girls all must, As chimney-sweepers come to dust.'

Mignonne, allons voir si la Rose  
Qui ce matin avoit desclose  
Sa robe de pourpre au Soleil,  
A point perdu ceste vesprée,  
Les plis de sa robe pourprée,  
Et son teint au vostre pareil.

Las ! voyez comme en peu d'espace,  
Mignonne, elle a dessus la place,  
Las, las, ses beautez laissé cheoir !  
O vrayment marastre Nature,  
Puisqu'une telle fleur ne dure  
Que du matin jusques au soir !

Donc, si vous me croyez, Mignonne,  
Tandis que votre âge fleuronne  
En sa plus verte nouveauté,  
Cueillez, cueillez vostre jeunesse :  
Comme à ceste fleur, la vieillesse  
Fera ternir votre beauté.

Was ever more grace of movement, charm of fancy, simple felicity of expression, crowded into eighteen lines? I am by no means one of those who cannot read Boileau, but I suppose that most English readers of this delightful piece will think with me that it has more poetry in its three stanzas than is to be found in all the works of the Historiographe-Royal.

The other is the famous sonnet. If what I have just quoted shows with what lightness and grace Ronsard could throw off a sketch, this is proof of the grand outline and gorgeous colour he had also at command when he chose :

Quand vous serez bien vieille, au soir, à la chandelle,  
Assise auprès du feu, devidant et filant,  
Direz, chantant mes vers et vous esmerveillant :  
Ronsard me célébroit du temps que j'étois belle.

Lors vous n'aurez servante oyant telle nouvelle  
Desja sous le labeur à demy sommeillant,  
Qui, au bruit de Ronsard, ne s'aïlle réveillant,  
Benissant votre nom de louange immortelle.

Je seray sous la terre, et, fantosme sans os,  
Par les ombres myrteux je prendrai mon repos ;  
Vous serez au fouyer une vieille accroupie :

Regrettant mon amour et vostre fier dédain.  
Vivez, si m'en croyez, n'attendez à demain :  
Cueillez dès aujourd'huy les roses de la vie.

This splendid Renaissance pride, which makes us smile even while we agree in Benvenuto Cellini, compels assent here by sheer magnificence of serene self-assurance. It is its own justification: for it has lifted the poet into such an atmosphere of inspiration, that his work still glows as if fresh from the fire with a light and heat which can never be quenched. There are few finer sonnets in any language. The slight pause after the fourth line, the fuller pause after that magnificent eighth line, the admirable opening of the sestet, all mark the perfect craftsman: and but for the break in sense, which almost makes a separate couplet of the last two lines, though the poet has done what he can to avoid it by not rhyming them together, it would be as splendidly perfect in technical excellence as it is in ideal conception.

But Ronsard is far more than the poet of two exquisite pieces. His first-rate work is indeed not much in bulk when compared with the whole amount of verse he left behind him: but that amount is enormous: and it remains true that, when all poor and mediocre matter has been removed, there is still left a larger volume of verse than has

sufficed for many poetic reputations. If we admit that his *Amours* are in the main intolerably tedious, his *Pindaric Odes* in the main intolerably artificial, and his famous *Hymnes* for the most part sonorous commonplace long drawn out, we not only leave a great deal untouched by our criticism, but we have to make exceptions even here. Nothing can alter the fact that the great *Ode to Michel de l'Hôpital* as the protector of the Muses is a magnificently imagined attempt to revive Pindar's method of building up a great poem on a merely personal and occasional basis. The enthusiasm of Ronsard's contemporaries for this ode is a proof of finer appreciation than one might expect, for his poetic imagination never rises higher than in its general scheme, and especially in its splendid pictures of the palace of Ocean and the hall of the Fates, and in the great speech of Jupiter when he grants their sphere to the Muses, his daughters.

Mais par sur tout prenez bien garde,  
 Gardez-vous bien de n'employer  
 Mes presens en un cœur qui garde  
 Son péché, sans le nettoyer :  
 Ains, devant que de luy respandre,  
 Purgez-le de vostre sainte eau,  
 Afin que net il puisse prendre  
 Un beau don dans un beau vaisseau ;  
 Et, luy, purgé, à l'heure à l'heure  
 Divinement il chantera  
 Je ne sai quel vers qui fera  
 Au cœur des hommes sa demeure.

And if the *Hymnes* have plenty of commonplace in them, one can understand the admiration felt for the *Hymn to Death* by that age, to which splendid rhetoric of stately movement was a new thing, and

which could not be expected to distinguish fully between fine words and great poetry. And the *Hymn to Night*, with its true Renaissance richness of effect, retains its charm even for us to-day.

Nuit, des amours ministre, et ministre fidelle  
Des arrests de Vénus, et des saintes loix d'elle,  
Qui secrete accompagne  
L'impatient amy de l'heure accoustumée,  
O mignonne des Dieux, mais plus encore aymée,  
Des estoiles compagnes.

C'est toy qui les soucis et les gennes mordantes,  
Et tout le soin enclos en nos âmes ardantes  
Par ton present arraches.

C'est toy qui rends la vie aux vergiers qui languissent  
Aux jardins la rousée, et aux cieux qui noircissent  
Les estoiles attaches.

Poetry pleases by a combination of the artificial and the natural. Both elements are always present in it, but now one and now the other appears to be dominant. Here we see the craftsman deliberately producing his effect by phrase and fancy carefully combined and worked up: elsewhere, as in the elegy on the felling of his favourite wood, the genuine feeling of the man makes itself felt so directly and so simply through the thin covering of art that we almost forget that art has had any hand at all in the result. Poets have in all ages pleaded against the encroachments of the plough: but it would be difficult to find in all literature a lament over fallen trees more beautiful or more evidently sincere than that of Ronsard over the forest of Gastine. After a vigorous denunciation of their destroyer, he goes on—

Forest, haute maison des oiseaux bocagers !  
Plus le Cerf solitaire et les Chevreuls légers

main true that the men of the Renaissance saw Nature from a new point of view and rendered her charm in a new manner. That manner had its defects and its exaggerations, and they were amply visited upon it. It was indeed less simple and less serious than the highest poetic treatment of Nature. It rarely saw far below the surface of things, and it coloured that surface with tints borrowed from literature and art. Woods and streams were, for it, not simply beautiful things, still less the sources of a philosophy of life; they were, above all, things charged with literary associations. Still, with all its defects, this manner was the outcome of a genuine delight in the new-found beauty of the world: and the poets of the last century were not mistaken in feeling that their first need a hundred years ago was to go back to this naïve and charming method. For in it, most undoubtedly, lay dormant for two centuries the living germ of the Romantic movement. And so one passes back, with a feeling of difference indeed, but not at all of strangeness, from Keats to Spenser, and from Hugo to Ronsard.

These comparative considerations help to explain why we more easily find ourselves at home in the literature of the Renaissance than the men of the eighteenth century did. They had lost the old key: we have made a new one. But they do not and cannot affect the absolute value of that literature in itself; and the thing that really needs explanation is not why we can enjoy it but why any one ever failed to do so. It is said that in the reign of Louis XIV. a man of taste would have been ashamed to confess that he read Ronsard. The revolutions

of literary opinion have occasionally been amazing; but one refuses to believe that any further wave of carelessness or ignorance can again overwhelm the poet who wrote, for instance, so exquisite a thing as the stanzas in which he prays to his beloved fountain of Belleric that he may be delivered in his fever from the torturing thought of its cool and delicious waters.

Écoute un peu, fontaine vive,  
En qui j'ay rebu si souvent,  
Couché tout plat de sur la rive,  
Oùif à la fraîcheur du vent,

Quand l'esté menager moi venant  
Le sein de Cérès dévoté,  
Et l'aïte par compas ressonne  
Dessous l'épi du blé brulé.

Ainsi toujours puis tes tu restre  
En dévoté religion  
Au bœuf et au bouvier champêtre  
De ta voisine région ;

Ainsi toujours la lune claire  
Voye à mi-nuit, au fond d'un val,  
Les nymphes près de ton repaire  
A mille bonds mener le bal,

Comme je désire, fontaine,  
De plus ne songer boire en toy  
L'esté, lors que la fièvre amène  
La mort despitée contre moy.

Poetry of this sort need not ask to be tried by any mere comparative or historical standard. If it be indeed still in its childhood, it is a childhood of that wonderful kind whose productions disdain to be compared with any but the works of full-grown men. Two hundred and fifty years later Keats would have been proud to sign it for his own.

The charm of Ronsard lies, I think, principally in two things: the effect as of 'something rich and strange,' which the best of his more elaborate work produces, and the graceful play of fancy, which is all the more delightful now that it is grown so rare in a serious world. We had the former in the prayer to the fountain: here it is again, in a prayer to the evening star.

Chère Vesper, lumière dorée  
De la belle Vénus Cythérée,  
Vesper dont la belle clarté luit  
Autant sur les astres de la nuit  
Que reluit par dessus toy la lune ;  
O claire image de la nuit brune,  
En lieu du beau croissant tout ce soir  
Donne lumière, et te laisse choir  
Bien tard dedans ta marine source.

Je ne veux, larron, oster la bourse  
A quelque amant, ou, comme un meschant  
Voleur, dévaliser un marchand ;  
Je veux aller outre la rivière  
Voir m'amie : mais sans ta lumière  
Je ne puis mon voyage achever.  
Sors doncques de l'eau pour te lever,  
Et de ta belle nuitale flame  
Esclaire au feu d'amour qui m'enflame.

The last rhyme is one of those which set Malherbe's red pencil to work; but, for all that, no one now will deny that this charming piece satisfies the demands of the imagination as few French poems did between Ronsard's day and Hugo's.

One might quote a hundred examples of his lightness and grace. What can be prettier, for instance than his welcome of the spring and the butterflies?

Dieu vous gard, troupe diaprée  
De papillons qui par la préce

Les douces herbes suçotez :  
 Et vous, nouvel essaim d'abeilles,  
 Qui les fleurs jaunes et vermeilles  
 Indifferemment baisotez.

Cent mille fois je resalue  
 Vostre belle et douce venue :  
 O que j'aime ceste saison  
 Et ce doux caquet des rivages,  
 Au prix des vents et des orages  
 Qui m'enfermoient en la maison :

or again his farewell to his own ' Pays de Vendomois,'  
 when he is starting for Italy ;

Terre, adieu, qui première  
 En tes bras m'a reçu,  
 Quand la belle lumière  
 Du monde j'apperçeu !

or the address to the Hawthorn which begins so  
 charmingly ;

Bel aubespın verdissant,  
 Fleurissant,  
 Le long de ce beau rivage,  
 Tu es vestu jusqu' au bas  
 Des longs bras  
 D'une lambrunche sauvage,

and ends perhaps still better—

Or vy, gentil aubespın,  
 Vy sans fin,  
 Vy sans que jamais tonnerre,  
 Ou la coignée, ou les vents,  
 Ou les temps,  
 Te puissent ruer par terre ;

or the praise of the Rose and the Violet, which shall  
 be the last of my quotations—

Sur toute fleurette déclose  
 J'aime la senteur de la rose,  
 Et l'odeur de la belle fleur  
 Qui de sa première couleur  
 Pare la terre, quand la glace  
 Et l'hiver au soleil font place.



Les autres boutons vermeillets,  
La giroflée et les œillets,  
Et le bel esmail qui varie  
L'honneur gemmé d'une prairie  
En mille lustres s'esclatant,  
Ensemble ne me plaisent tant  
Que fait la rose pourperette,  
Et de Mars la blanche fleurette.

Que puis-je, pour le passe temps  
Que vous me donnez le printemps  
Prier pour vous deux autre chose  
Sinon que toy, pourprine rose,  
Puisses toujours avoir le sein  
En mai de rosée tout plein,  
Et que jamais le chaut qui dure  
En juin ne te fasse laidure.

Ny à toy, fleurette de mars,  
Jamais l'hyver, lorsque tu pars  
Hors de la terre, ne te face  
Pancher morte dessus la place ;  
Ains toujours, maugré la froideur,  
Puisses-tu de ta soefve odeur  
Nous annoncer que l'an se vire  
Plus doux vers nous, et que Zephyre  
Après le tour du fascheux temps  
Nous ramene le beau printemps.

I might go on quoting for ever. The astonishing thing, as I said, is that, as men have never altogether given up caring for the spring and the flowers, they should have ever lost the taste for such poetry as this. The fact seems to be that in the sixteenth century, when every one was young, there was an overflow of enthusiasm and colour and ornament. The poets were in a sense children delighting in the prettiness of a world of new toys, and asking for no more. The making of verses was a new game, and it was an unfailing amusement to see how many combinations could be got out of

a very small pack of cards. But that could not last for ever: and the next century found the pack too small and the pictures on their faces insipid. The sentiments and the imagination, most of all, perhaps, the fancy, had outrun the mind in the poetry of the Renaissance: and the inevitable result was a reaction to a state of things in which poetry no longer decorates life or plays with it, but criticises it, educates it, forms it. And this was the main effort of literature both in France and in England for more than a hundred years. It became the first duty of the poet to talk common sense. He was no longer to be a dreamer, or a wanderer, consorting with nymphs and shepherds, but a plain man, mixing with his neighbours, and using the language of 'the town,' meaning what he said and saying what he meant. And no doubt the change had many good results. There was a most necessary pruning of the youthful exuberance which had been far too conspicuous both in the language and in the sentiment of the poets of the Renaissance. And literature in becoming more matter-of-fact became at first more sincere. It is not, indeed, fair to ask too strict a consistency of poets: for poetry is the outcome of a mood of inspiration, which will not always come upon a man in the same way. The imaginative temper is besides specially inclined to see things from different sides at different moments. But the exaggeration and inconsistency of many of the men of the Renaissance is such as to make it impossible to believe in their seriousness. Not only is the whole of their treatment of the subject of love profoundly tainted with affectation and obvious in-

sincerity, but they are Epicurean at one moment, Stoic at another, now the loosest of Pagans, now the most orthodox of Christians and Catholics. Death is sometimes treated as sleep or extinction, at another as the gate of heaven or hell. The result is that an impression of entire want of seriousness is left on the mind. Half the interest of Wordsworth or Shelley or Goethe lies in the consciousness of profound conviction behind all the poet says. It may not all be quite consistent: but it has all been lived through, deeply felt, and made a part of the poet's nature. No one could feel that about Ronsard: on serious subjects he is a rhetorician, not a thinker: and his rhetoric is at the service of all opinions and all causes. It would be impossible to go to such a man for inspiration as to the higher parts of life and conduct. He has indeed little to say about them, and that little is not his own.

One reaction produces another. We pass, in the seventeenth century, from a literature whose high qualities are almost exclusively of the imagination to one whose high qualities are almost exclusively of the intelligence. Poetry, which had, in the previous period, been content simply to see and to feel, made it its special function to think. It was the beginning of the great era of critical activity, which has continued down to the present day. But in the special field of poetry it led to exaggerations which produced the counter reaction at the beginning of the nineteenth century. In their desire to be certain of building upon a foundation of common sense, poets had forgotten to proceed to the superstructure which could only be reared by the help

of the imagination. Poetry, rejoicing in the energy of the intellect, did not feel the need of anything more, and delivered itself up to a reign of didacticism in which it was made the vehicle for expounding theories on any and every subject, from the constitution of the universe to the art of preserving health and the science of the chase. Such subjects may be possible poetic themes under certain conditions of treatment: but here the treatment became that of the intelligence alone. The result was that a new reaction, this time in favour of a new birth of the imagination, was inevitable: and we are familiar with it in the nearly contemporary movements headed by the Lake poets in England and by Victor Hugo in France.

A revival of interest in Ronsard, as I have said, naturally followed. For the Romantic protest was especially directed against the absence of colour, and liberty, and variety, as well as of the true poetic imagination, in the verse of the eighteenth century. And as the men of eighty years ago travelled back in search of these qualities, they found La Fontaine, indeed, half consciously in possession of some of the best of them, but to find them in full and conscious perfection it was necessary to go behind Malherbe, to go in fact to Ronsard and the *Pléiade*. It was Malherbe who taught French poetry the Alexandrine drill and clothed it in the tight-fitting drab uniform which so long impeded its free movement. Ronsard could use the great twelve-syllable metre with splendid effect—indeed it was he and his friends who revived it after a disuse of two centuries—but the quotations I have given show

that he did not confine himself to it. In fact he is the inventor of a great many of the best French measures, which lay forgotten with him till they were rediscovered and revived by the Romantics. Even so late as at the reception of Leconte de Lisle into the Academy, Alexandre Dumas could still maintain the extraordinary traditional theory that all poetic subjects could be successfully handled in Alexandrines, and that no other metre was required. Ronsard knew better. He has an infinite variety of metre and movement, and it is to that that he owes a large part of his revived popularity. But he owes even more to his quality of imagination, to what may fairly be called his qualities of soul, than he does to any technical excellences. His editor, Blanchemain, justly calls him 'créateur du style noble dans la poésie française'; other critics have spoken of his rich harmonies, of his creative instinct, of his 'élans sublimes.' Sainte-Beuve praises his 'fibre héroïque et mâle.' It is in such things as these that his special distinction lies, as his special charm lies in the ease and grace of his delightful lyrics. He was wanting in the sense of order, in patience, in that watchful self-criticism which gives the crown of perfection to the thought and utterance of poets. And the very language he had to use was as yet unformed. But his unconquerable ardour and enthusiasm forced a way through all obstacles, and gave France, as has been said, a poetry, before she had a language, of her own. Throughout his life he was buoyed up by the conviction that he had been born to accomplish a great task, that through him, more than any other man, French poetry was

to acquire a new greatness of conception, a higher dignity of speech. And the proof that, in spite of all defects and all difficulties, he did, in large measure, accomplish that task, not merely for his own age but for all time, may be seen in the fact that even to-day the words that rise readiest to the lips when the critic is speaking of Ronsard are such as I have quoted, 'noble,' 'heroic,' 'sublime.'

LA FONTAINE

## LA FONTAINE

WHO shall express the charm of La Fontaine? There is a chance, at any rate, of saying what one means about the bottomless depth of Molière's knowledge of human folly, and his boundless power of putting that knowledge to effective purpose on a stage; or about Boileau's admirable wit, and still more admirable good sense; or again about Racine's formal perfections, or the sentimental elegance of Lamartine; but charm, such charm as every one who possesses a sense of humour and a little French has felt in La Fontaine, is another thing altogether, and one far more difficult to define. Brilliancy, eloquence, passion, wit, are all things definitely felt — things of which, rightly or wrongly, we fancy ourselves to be easily able to give a clear account: but that quality by virtue of which a man's books make us wish to know him, and think of him as a delightful person to meet strolling in the Elysian fields, is a far less visible thing, less tangible, less easy to get hold of.

And it is also a far rarer thing. Herodotus has it, alone among the Greeks, I think, unless Plato should be added. Horace has it more than any one among the Romans; La Fontaine more than any other Frenchman, perhaps as much as any one of any age or nation. One side, indeed, of the French



character is very friendly to its growth, and several of the great writers of France, Marot, for instance, and Molière and Montaigne, have possessed more than a touch of it. But then, there is, as we know, another side of that character, with a tendency to rhetoric as its besetting sin: and there is nothing of which charm is so much afraid as of rhetoric: so that it is only the very elect that can be saved. They are by no means necessarily the greatest men. The greatest, in fact, can hardly stoop to possess charm. Who could think of being familiar with Dante or Milton, or dare to break in lightly upon the Olympian dignity of Goethe? Our place in their presence would be at their feet; and if we had to confess ourselves to them, and lay out before them all our weaknesses and worse than weaknesses exactly as they are, it would be with a shy if not with a guilty shrinking that we should do it. But Herodotus, we are sure, would only smile at us, Horace would still find a place for us at supper, La Fontaine would at worst laugh at us in a fable. And it is men of this sort that possess charm. They do not need an intellect of the very highest order, but their intelligence must be intensely alive, full of curiosity, receptive of influences from every side, instinct with sympathy for the most varied characters, and for forms of life the most unlike their own. Everything interests them, nothing absorbs them. They are lookers-on at the great games of religion, and politics, and fortune played by other men, and they watch each rise and fall with amused curiosity, chronicle it, point its moral, and pass by. Herodotus puts them all alike

down in his note-book: the Thracians who make lamentations when their children are born, the Persians who hold their state councils first in the evening when drunk, and then again when sober in the morning; Cræsus, who misunderstands wise sayings, and obstinately inclines to think himself happy although not dead; and Xerxes impiously and recklessly refusing to turn back from his expedition into Greece, although warned by so clear a portent as that of a mare being delivered of a hare; and no doubt he would have added, if he had known of them, that delightful people the Celts, who, according to Aristotle, pushed their courage beyond the due mean, being afraid neither of earthquakes nor of breakers: all in his eyes simply curious items in the long list of human eccentricities. That is the mood: it comes out in one way of course in a historian, and another in a poet; but it is the same spirit, the same cast of mind, large and tolerant, never angry or impatient or censorious, full of an indulgent sympathy for all the weaknesses of humanity, resolved to see kindly even when it sees most clearly, and set on getting the best that can be got out of men and out of life. It is a leisurely temper, too, with time to brood and meditate, and time for that seeing of the other side of things which is always impossible to men of action. Above all, perhaps, it must include the gift of humour. It sounds strange at first to find La Fontaine saying:—

On cherche les rieurs; et moi je les évite.  
Cet art veut, sur tout autre, un suprême mérite :  
Dieu ne créa que pour les sots  
Les méchants diseurs de bons mots—

but there is nothing that spoils pleasant company so much as the presence of a bore who is always wanting to say something good; and the man of genuine humour is the first to resent a nuisance of that sort. One may be quite sure that no one enjoyed a really good thing more than La Fontaine. But it must be perfectly natural and simple: there must be absolutely nothing like attitudinising. That is why the French, whose national brightness and amiability take them half-way to the possession of charm, have not produced more writers possessing it. They have been too like the bull in La Fontaine's fable of 'The Man and the Serpent';

Faisons taire  
Cet ennuyeux déclamateur :  
Il cherche de grands mots.

That has been a weak point in French literature, and in the character of the French nation, from Corneille to Victor Hugo. Nowhere, I suppose, but in France could a great writer pose before his public as Hugo did habitually. Only a Frenchman could have written that preface to *L'Histoire d'un Crime* ('le livre est plus qu'actuel: il est urgent. Je le publie') in which, to English ears, the poet seems simply to be caricaturing himself. Things of that sort are quite fatal to charm; but the simple fact that a man, without going so far as that, never lets himself be seen in his books, except in a sort of Court dress, is nearly equally fatal. We cannot pretend to know Corneille, or Racine, or Bossuet. They are voices from behind a curtain which is never raised. Even the ever-delightful Molière, like Shakspeare, very rarely betrays to us which of

his many voices is his own. But with the men of whom I am speaking it is just the opposite. The face is always peering from behind the curtain.

Bornons ici cette carrière :

Les longs ouvrages me font peur,

says La Fontaine at the end of the first half of his fables, and we think at once of the easy-going *bon-homme*, who early in life found theological studies a weariness of the flesh, gave them up without hesitation, and 'lived happily ever afterwards,' like a princess in a fairy tale. And fifty fables hint his confession that prosy talkers were no more to his taste than lengthy volumes. 'Tout babillard, tout censeur, tout pédant'; they are all his enemies, and it is with surprised disgust that he perceives how 'le créateur en a béni l'engeance.' Indeed he lets us see everywhere his scant liking for important, and especially self-important, people of all kinds. The new splendour of the Court was the pride of France in his day; every one wanted to belong to it, and those who could not wanted to know all they could about it. No one spoke of it but with wondering admiration. La Fontaine, on the other hand, often alludes to courts and courtiers in his fables, and never but with obvious dislike and contempt. 'Ce n'est pas sur l'habit que la diversité me plaît, c'est dans l'esprit,' as he says in 'The Leopard and the Monkey': and 'oh! que de grands seigneurs,' so experience had taught him, 'n'ont que l'habit pour tous talents!' Indeed, whether he speaks in his own person or through his birds and animals, he is always letting us see his own likes and dislikes: and the general lines of his portrait come out quite clear. He loves

sadly unalterable laws of fate, in sole and undisputed possession of so many of life's biggest and sweetest plums: and, in addition to these, their proper delights, we must needs surrender to them, in our ignorant good-nature, so much else to whose full flavour their inexperienced palates cannot attain. The pleasures of blindman's buff, or of building sand castles by the sea, are, of necessity, become vain things to us, except, now and then, by leave and help of their rightful proprietors: but why should we paint the lily, or pile Ossa upon Pelion, by heaping on their mountain of happiness treasures of which we alone, and not they, can make perfect use—the treasures, for instance, that lie within the covers of such books as *Alice in Wonderland*, or these delightful and inexhaustible *Fables*! Here are things by which we might renew our youth and amiability every six months, and we carelessly abandon them to those who have more youth than they wish for and too much amiability to know anything about it!

The truth is that La Fontaine, confessing himself, and confessing as much of humanity as came within his reach, is the one French poet who speaks to all the world. Only Molière, who is but half a poet, has as wide an audience. It is only the fact that La Fontaine's best work is called *Fables* that has stood in the way of his being known for what he is. No one is more truly and variously human than he. He cannot, indeed, be said to see the whole of life: but he sees a large part of it, and his part includes the things that are most immediately recognised and enjoyed by all the world. In that sense he is, what

I think Sainte-Beuve called him, the French Homer : the one universal poet of France.

And there is another thing. He has a unique place in French literary history. He stands between the old and the new, and has learnt the clearness and order of the age of Louis XIV., without unlearning the freedom and humour of the French of the Renaissance. Then, again, though he lived chiefly in Paris, he still breathes in his writings the fresh air of the country, which his contemporaries and successors were exchanging for the close atmosphere of the Court and the capital. He still knows the French peasant, and his curé, and his seigneur, and all the varied population of the fields. And that is a help to his popularity : the land and the people who live on it are the same from generation to generation, while the town life of one century is unintelligible or ridiculous to the next.

And so for all these reasons La Fontaine has a place in our hearts such as no other French poet can claim. We love him, and laugh with him, even at him sometimes, and, as I said, should like some day to come across him in the Elysian fields. That is how people have always felt towards him, and we cannot help believing that the servant girl was right when she said that 'God would never have the heart to send him to hell.' Even in the days of the Terror the mere name of La Fontaine saved his great-grand-daughter from the guillotine. And yet, if you ask what makes every one so fond of him, I can hardly say : not his virtues, certainly, for of them he had no very superfluous store ; there is not much in his life that we can grow enthusiastic

about, and some things, I am afraid, which we had better leave alone. He is anything but a hero, and if I were pressed to say why we almost love him, I could only fall back upon my first answer and say, for his *charm*.

The truth is that his life was the pleasant easy-going life natural to an Epicurean born with enough to live on, and in days before people thought there was any crime in being comfortable. His father had a place in the forestry department at Château-Thierry, a town on the Marne, about fifty or sixty miles from Paris. He seems to have done two important things for his son, besides his part in bringing him into the world. When La Fontaine was about twenty-six, his father handed over his place to him, and presented him with a girl of fifteen for his wife. Neither gift can be said to have been very successful, for La Fontaine neglected the forests, and deserted his wife. There was no public scandal, and certainly no divorce; they lived some years together, and had a son, and for a long time after that they occasionally corresponded and even met; but Madame La Fontaine was a frivolous and unpractical woman, just the sort of wife to be impossible for a helplessly unbusiness-like man of the stamp of La Fontaine, who wanted a wife who could look after him, and see that he did not forget his dinner or put his clothes on inside out. And in fact something of this sort became necessary for him in the end; so that after the death of the Duchess of Orleans, in whose household he had had a place, his friend Madame de la Sablière took him to live in her house, where he stayed for twenty years, remaining

even when she broke up her establishment: ('J'ai renvoyé tout mon monde,' she said, 'je n'ai gardé que mon chien, mon chat, et La Fontaine'); and indeed staying there even after she herself had left it to devote herself entirely to hospital nursing, and when he at last left at her death, it was only to go to his friend d'Hervart, in whose house he died. Every one knows the story of M. d'Hervart meeting him in the street after Madame de la Sablière's death, and saying, 'My dear La Fontaine, I was just looking for you to ask you to come and live with me'; and La Fontaine's answer, 'I was on my way there,' (*j'y allais*). It is often said that we can show nothing like the ancient friendships; but what Roman friendship is more complete than this?

Born in 1621, and married in 1647, La Fontaine continued to live with his wife at Château-Thierry and discharge his official duties after a fashion—no doubt his own fashion—till about 1654, when one Jannart, a relation of his wife's, who held some post under Fouquet, the all-powerful controller of the finances, took him to Paris and presented him to Fouquet, who at once added La Fontaine to the crowd of men of letters under his patronage, and gave him a pension of a thousand francs. From that time Paris was his home, though for many years he paid an annual visit to Château-Thierry, generally accompanied by Boileau and Racine. His relations with Fouquet do him as much honour as anything in his life; for when Fouquet fell in 1661, struck down in a moment by Louis XIV.'s sudden outbreak of furious suspicion as by a thunderbolt out of a clear sky, La Fontaine did not desert him,



as his political partisans did, but did all the little he could for him: wrote letters to friends, and an ode to the king asking for his pardon, and finally that lament over his patron's fall which is among the finest of French elegies.

*C'est être innocent que d'être malheureux* was a doctrine certain to commend itself to the good-natured La Fontaine, who had not a grain of vindictiveness in his composition, and was besides in favour of every one enjoying himself. His friend Jannart shared Fouquet's disgrace, and had to retire to Limoges; and La Fontaine, perhaps also by royal order, accompanied him on his journey, of which he has left us a charming picture in the letters he wrote to his wife on the way. Some wives would be content to be deserted by their husbands if their absence were productive of such letters as La Fontaine's. He enjoyed himself immensely, in spite of their rather melancholy circumstances: 'Really,' he says with the *naïveté* of a child, 'it is a pleasure to travel; one always comes across something worth seeing. I can't tell you how good the butter we have here is.' First it is a fine garden that delights him, more than any luxury or grandeur, he says—

De quoi sert tant de dépense?  
Les grands ont beau s'en vanter :  
Vive la magnificence  
Qui ne coûte qu'à planter !

And then a few days later, with amiable inconsistency, he is loud in his praises of the great Cardinal's splendid palace at Richelieu !

Altogether he seems to have enjoyed himself very

much, and gives us pleasant enough pictures of himself and his party, worth quoting, as there are very few of his letters left. Here is what he writes from Amboise—

Your uncle's occupations and mine at Clamart were very different. He did nothing worth speaking of, only such amusing things as expeditions to this place and that, lawsuits and other business. It was just the opposite with me: I strolled about and went to sleep, and spent my time with the ladies who came to see us.

We left very early on Sunday. Madame C—— and my aunt went with us as far as Bourg-la-Reine. We waited there nearly three hours: and to make the time pass quicker, or to make it pass still slower (I don't know which I ought to say), we heard the village mass. There was nothing wanting, procession, holy water, hymn and the rest. Luckily for us, the curé was an ignoramus and did not preach. At last, by God's grace, came the coach; the king's servant was there: there were no monks, but to make up for them, three women, a commercial traveller who never said a word, and a lawyer who never stopped singing, and sang very badly—he was carrying home four volumes of songs. Among the three women was one from Poitou, who said she was a countess: she seemed young enough, and of a tolerable figure, appeared bright and lively, kept her name to herself, and had just been to law to get a separation from her husband; all qualities of good augury; and I should have found my way to a flirtation if only she had been pretty, but without that nothing attracts me; it's the chief thing, in my opinion, and I defy you to make me see a particle of wit in a plain woman.

After these alarming revelations, it is no wonder that he thought it best to blow his marital trumpet, which he does in the next letter.

See how good I am; it is just midnight, and we have to be up before the sun, in spite of the fact that he promised before he went to bed to be on the move extremely early. And yet here am I, child of sleep and idleness as I am, employing these hours which are the most precious of the twenty-four to me, in telling you all about our doings. Let people talk to me after this of husbands who have sacrificed themselves to their wives. I consider I beat them all.'

Later on, when they got into a dull country, they took to religious controversy to keep themselves awake.

La dispute est d'un grand secours  
Sans elle on dormirait toujours.

The Huguenots were still in the land in those days, and the Poitou lady was one, while the king's footman, or page of honour, who travelled with them, was a fervent son of Holy Church, as became a member of the household of Louis XIV. 'He undertook to show the lady that her religion was worth nothing for many reasons: amongst others because Luther had had a quantity of illegitimate children, and because Huguenots never go to mass: he advised her to be converted, unless she wished to go to hell, for purgatory was too good for people of that sort. The lady betook herself to the Bible, and asked where it spoke of purgatory; meanwhile the lawyer sang, and M. Jannart and I went to sleep.' With one eye, or at least one ear, open, one may suppose, by the account he gives of the argument.

He never had the taste of his time for theological controversy, from his days in the seminary onwards; and when all Paris was exciting itself about the Molinist question, he astounded every one by saying simply that he thought it a nuisance. There is a story too of a saying of his about St. Augustine, which amusingly illustrates his theological attitude. He and Racine and some others were spending one afternoon with Boileau, and Boileau's brother, a doctor of the Sorbonne, was holding forth rather pompously and professionally upon the merits of the great Bishop of Hippo. La

Fontaine appeared to be dreaming in his usual absent-minded way, and nobody thought he was listening, when to the surprise of every one he looked up, and with an air of great interest asked the doctor, 's'il croyait que St. Augustin eût plus d'esprit que Rabelais.' The learned doctor, I am bound to add, saved the saint's dignity and his own surprisingly well. He turned to La Fontaine, examined him critically from head to foot, and then said, 'Are you aware, M. de la Fontaine, that you have got one of your stockings on inside out?' 'Ce qui était vrai,' adds the chronicler.

One more picture of him. This time he is not asleep—or not altogether—but strolling by distraction in the garden of an hotel, which he had mistaken for his own, and so buried in the interesting author whom the French call by that deliciously absurd name Tite-Live, that he forgets his dinner altogether, and would have been too late for it, if a servant had not come to arouse him from his Roman reveries. What a picture, not only of La Fontaine, but of his day! How many people nowadays find Livy exciting enough to make them forget dinner?

It was worth giving a few stories of this sort, because there is nothing else in La Fontaine's life but little things of this kind. He has no history, and after Fouquet's fall there are no events to mark his years by, except the publication of his various works; his election to the Academy, in spite of Louis XIV.'s opposition; his illness in 1692; his final and sincere regrets for all that had given cause of scandal in his life, and still more in some of his

writings; his public profession before the Academy of his repentance; his strict and serious life during his closing years, and his death in April 1695. No man of his time had won more universal love and admiration; Molière, Racine, and even Boileau, among the poets; La Bruyère the moralist, Madame de Sévigné the woman of the world, and last, perhaps also best, Fénelon, saintliest of men who have lived in Courts since the days of Marcus Aurelius, all praised the poet with emphatic enthusiasm, and, if all did not know the man well enough to love him, those who did made up for the rest by the loyalty and warmth of their affection. One of them may speak for all, Maucroix, the friend of his whole life, to whom he wrote his last, most touching, letter: 'O mon cher, mourir n'est rien: mais songes-tu que je vais comparaître devant Dieu? Tu sais comme j'ai vécu. Avant que tu reçoives ce billet, les portes de l'éternité seront peut-être ouvertes pour moi.'—That friendship of fifty years has the best right to speak and it speaks plainly: 'c'était l'âme la plus sincère et la plus candide que j'aie jamais connue: jamais de déguisement, je ne sais s'il a menti en sa vie.'

La Fontaine's fame must rest mainly upon his *Fables*. The occasional pieces have charming things in them, humorous touches, delightful bits of self-revelation, and, here and there, exquisite little songs. The *Contes* have only one demerit, but that is a serious one—they cannot be read aloud in any decent society. Nothing gives us a clearer picture of the manners of the seventeenth century than the simple fact that the ladies of La Fontaine's day, and

the best of them too, women like Madame de Sévigné, read and enjoyed his *Contes*; and, what is much more, confessed to doing so. Times have changed, and that is impossible now. It is a thousand pities, for every reason, that there is this blemish, for there never was a better story-teller than La Fontaine. But happily this charming gift of his is not exhibited only in the *Contes*. A man's special talent, like his sins, is sure to find him out, and the result is that nearly all the *Fables* are well-told stories, and a good many are nothing else. In fact, it is just this which distinguishes La Fontaine's fables from other people's. Æsop, Phædrus, Babrius, Marie de France, Haudent, Florian, or what other fabulist you will, will give you the bare facts and the moral just as well as La Fontaine. But none of them—unless, here and there, Haudent—have more than a touch, if they have that, of his ease, his grace, his arch asides, his sly humour, his catholic good-nature, his amusing self-revelation—in a word, again, his charm. The morality of his rivals may be irreproachable, but their stories are too often bare and dull. La Fontaine takes them and fills in a hundred little details, often of an irresistible drollery, which complete the picture and give personality to the actors. A detailed comparison with any one of his rivals would show La Fontaine's superiority. As we cannot take all, we will try it with Phædrus, as to whose supposed superiority over himself La Fontaine keeps up an absurd superstition of humility. The fact, of course, is just the other way, and this is the more remarkable, as the fables which cover the same ground as those of

Phædrus are most often in La Fontaine's first six books, which are very inferior to the seventh, eighth, ninth, and tenth books, simply because he followed his originals more closely at first, and gave the rein far less freely to his own delightful fancy. Here is Phædrus's fable of 'The Fox and the Goat':—

'When a crafty man gets into a difficulty, he at once tries to find his way out at the expense of some one else.

'A fox had fallen into a well unawares, and could not get out again for the high wall round it, when a thirsty goat came up and asked whether there was plenty of water, and whether it was good. The fox had his trick ready. "Come down and try for yourself, my dear friend; the water is so good, and the taste so delicious, that I can't get enough to satisfy me." Down went our bearded friend; whereupon the little rascal sprang at once on his lofty horns, and got out of the well, leaving the goat stuck fast in his watery prison.'

This is a very fair specimen of Phædrus. Now hear La Fontaine, and remember that the fable is in his third book, that is to say, one of those written before he had fully learnt his own secret:—

Capitaine renard allait de compagnie  
Avec son ami bouc des plus haut encornés;  
Celui-ci ne voyait pas plus loin que son nez;  
L'autre était passé maître en fait de tromperie.  
La soif les obligea de descendre en un puits:  
Là, chacun d'eux se désaltère.  
Après qu'abondamment tous deux en eurent pris,  
Le renard dit au bouc: Que ferons-nous, compère?  
Ce n'est pas tout de boire, il faut sortir d'ici.  
Lève tes pieds en haut, et tes cornes aussi:  
Mets-les contre le mur: le long de ton échine

Je grimperai premièrement :  
Puis sur tes cornes m'élevant,  
A l'aide de cette machine,  
De ce lieu-ci je sortirai,  
Après quoi je t'en tirerai.  
Par ma barbe, dit l'autre, il est bon ; et je loue  
Des gens bien sensés comme toi.  
Je n'aurais jamais, quant à moi,  
Trouvè ce secret, je l'avoue.  
Le renard sort du puits, laisse son compagnon,  
Et vous lui fait un beau sermon  
Pour l'exhorter à patience.  
Si le ciel t'eût, dit-il, donné par excellence  
Autant de jugement que de barbe au menton,  
Tu n'aurais pas, à la légère,  
Descendu dans ce puits. Or, adieu ; j'en suis hors :  
Tâche de t'en tirer, et fais tous tes efforts :  
Car, pour moi, j'ai certaine affaire  
Qui ne me permet pas d'arrêter en chemin.  
En toute chose il faut considérer la fin.

The fable is not quite in La Fontaine's best manner, and he has not improved on the story as Phædrus had it. He has copied from Haudent (for it is certain, in spite of Sainte-Beuve, that he was acquainted with the early French fabulists) his inferior version, which makes the animals get into the well together ; and some of the fox's remarks were also suggested by Haudent ; but the admirable speech of the goat is La Fontaine's idea, and his whole fable is infinitely more alive than his predecessor's. And, if he has improved on Haudent's fable, who can fail to see his superiority to Phædrus ? His picture is far more complete, and he humanises his actors far more cleverly. His fox is not 'the fox' whom we should find in a dictionary of animals ; that is never La Fontaine's way ; and just as in his fable of 'The Fox and the Grapes,' his fox is a



particular individual about whom he has made inquiries, 'certain renard gascon, d'autres disent normand,' and his monkey in 'The Leopard and the Monkey,' is a person of rank, proud of his family—

Cousin et gendre de Bertrand,  
Singe du Pape en son vivant :

so here from the very first line we are dealing with 'Captain Fox,' a friend of ours, although unfortunately 'passé maître en fait de tromperie.' We think we see him coming along the road with his friend of the long horns. And then how admirable is his polite, leisurely, well-arranged logic! And the goat swearing by his beard to the pleasure he finds in being in such clever society: how exactly he gives us the picture of the rustic of La Fontaine's day, and indeed of our day, and of every day, lost in admiration of the cleverness of the itinerant cheat, who is all the while pocketing his money! And the *beau sermon*, too, with its delightful conclusion, in which La Fontaine is absolutely himself—

Pour moi, j'ai certaine affaire  
Qui ne me permet pas d'arrêter en chemin.

I will give one more instance, the well-known one, of 'The Ant and the Cicada.' Heré is Phædrus's fable:—

'An ant in winter-time drew out of her hole the grain which, like a wise creature, she had collected in the summer, and was drying it when a hungry cicada asked her to give her some. "What were you doing in the summer?" says the ant to her. "I had no time to think about the future," she replied; "I was always wandering about, and singing my

song from hedge to hedge and meadow to meadow." The ant laughed, and put back the grain, saying, "You sang in the summer, and now the cold is come, you can dance."

'Let the lazy man set to work in time, or, when he has nothing, he may find that asking will not get him anything.'

Contrast this with La Fontaine. It is his first, and one of his best-known fables:—

La Cigale, ayant chanté  
 Tout l'été,  
 Se trouva fort dépourvue  
 Quand la bise fut venue :  
 Pas un seul petit morceau  
 De mouche ou de vermisseau.  
 Elle alla crier famine,  
 Chez la fourmi sa voisine,  
 La priant de lui prêter  
 Quelque grain pour subsister  
 Jusqu'à la saison nouvelle.  
 Je vous paierai, lui dit-elle,  
 Avant l'ôût, foi d'animal,  
 Intérêt et principal.  
 La fourmi n'est pas prêteuse :  
 C'est là son moindre défaut.  
 Que faisiez-vous au temps chaud ?  
 Dit-elle à cette emprunteuse.—  
 Nuit et jour à tout venant  
 Je chantais, ne vous déplaîse.—  
 Vous chantiez ! j'en suis fort aise,  
 Eh bien ! dansez maintenant.

How the naked story and the bare morality of Phædrus is transformed ! Every line, every word is alive with the touch of the artist, both poet and painter ! Every detail is made to tell ; the quick returning rhyme of the second line,

ayant chanté  
 Tout l'été,

seeming to make us hear the monotonous song of the cicada in the heat of the long summer day; the *bise* striking in in the fourth line, its very name hissing and whistling, till we hear the east wind sweeping round a cold corner; and then the simple singing motion of that delightful verse—

Nuit et jour à tout venant,

and the last line, stepping like a minuet—

Eh bien ! dansez maintenant.

Humming this last line, I found that, quite unconsciously, I had set it to the only minuet air that I know. Language and metre have been used with telling effect in almost every line; and the contrast of the mocking dance of this last line with the heavy cautious rhythm of what the ant says when she speaks in her own character—

Que faisiez-vous au temps chaud ?

is not the least striking thing in this way.

But the talent of the story-teller is there quite as much as that of the artist in metrical effect. The poet is painter as well as musician, and can make us see as well as hear. What personality and picturesqueness is thrown round those comparatively uninteresting creatures, the *Formica prudens* and the *Cicada esuriens* of Phædrus! The *esuriens* becomes *se trouva fort dépourvue*, and we find her making the inconvenient, surprising, and irritating discovery that there is nothing in the larder, not one single little bit of a grub or a fly; and then instead of mere asking, she goes off to *crier famine*; and the ant is not just any ant, but her neighbour;

and the grain is to be lent, not given; and not merely returned, but repaid *foi d'animal, Intérêt et principal*. And the ant instead of being solely gifted with prudence, is a complete picture, and so human, like an old maiden lady severely questioning a pretty beggar girl; and the poor girl hopes to propitiate her with a smile and a curtesy (*ne vous déplaîse!*); but improvident youth and beauty get no mercy from spectacled spinsterdom, and are left to dance before a severely-closed front door that frowns in stolid rejection of every appeal.

Well may La Fontaine say himself that what makes the success of these things is simply *la manière de les conter*. He says it indeed of his *Contes*; but, happily for us, there are very few of his fables with which the *conteur* did not have as much to do as the fabulist. And it is the presence everywhere of the born story-teller which makes his fables what no other fables are. It may even be, perhaps, that his unique gifts in this direction have obscured his purely poetic powers. Yet no good judge can doubt their reality. He has obvious and grave limitations, of course: for instance, he rarely stirs our blood and never inspires us: but what he tried to do he did perfectly: and perfection is the longest-lived of all poetic qualities. His place is in fact absolutely secure. A man who has been for over two centuries the most popular poet of a great nation, equally dear to the men of letters and to the people, has had a seal set on his fame which nothing can disturb. Only the men who have gone to the heart of things ever gain that verdict of the centuries. And there is another quality in which

he is supreme. I have made no pretension here to enter into detailed discussion of technical questions of metre and language: but without going into anything of that sort it is safe to say that no one who has given the slightest attention to the art of writing verse can fail to recognise one of its masters in La Fontaine. His ease in handling his instrument is simply astonishing. He is one of the very few poets of any age or nation who seem to be able to say always and everywhere exactly what they wish, and even to say it exactly as they wish. He never says more than he wants and never less, and there is nothing which he cannot say. The most evanescent of fancies is caught before it vanishes, the most elusive touch of character is held as firmly as the most solid and obvious. And each is given its own musical accompaniment. He lived in the generation which saw all the old metres driven out of the paradise of French poetry to make a solitude for the formal Alexandrine. But, as he tells us in the charming Platonic dialogue in which he set his *Amours de Psyché*, Polyphile (his suggestive name for himself) listened to what his friends had to say, but *de tout cela il ne prit que ce qu'il lui plut*. And formal monotony was the last thing in the world to please him. He would no more surrender his mastery of metre than he would his mastery of language: he revives old words and old metres and invents new ones of his own: with the result that one of the most competent of living French critics has declared that the student of French rhythms may content himself with reading La Fontaine and Hugo, and ignore all the rest.

And besides, though he comes before us chiefly as a writer of fables, he has given us plenty of proof of the reality of his poetic temper. He loved the open air, not merely as the sportsman loves it as the place of his healthiest enjoyment, but as the poet loves it, composing his verses in the woods, like Wordsworth, and finding there a world of strange and beautiful dreams.

Les forêts, les eaux, les prairies,  
are for him

Mères des douces rêveries,  
language that makes us think of Corot, with whom, indeed, he had a good deal in common. What could be more like Corot than his river :

Image d'un sommeil doux, paisible, et tranquille :  
or his rabbit who

Était allé faire à l'aurore sa cour  
Parmi le thym et la rosée ?

His life was chiefly lived in Paris, but he casts sincerely regretful eyes back to the country :

Solitude, où je trouve une douceur secrète,  
Lieux que j'aimai toujours, ne pourrai-je jamais,  
Loin du monde et du bruit, goûter l'ombre et le frais ?

These lines, and the lines that follow them, mean more, I am sure, than a scholar's pleasure in remembering Virgil's *O qui me gelidis in vallibus Hæmi!* They mean that *doux et exquis enthousiasme* for which Joubert praised him. In comparison with humanity nature plays, it is true, a very small part in his fables. But the touches that

we get are from a lover's hand. One can fancy him sharing Landor's feeling, 'I never pluck the rose,' so tender is the regret with which he speaks of the spring buds torn off by the nasty schoolboy who

Gâtait jusqu'aux boutons, douce et frêle espérance.

His feeling for nature is, I think, of the same kind as his feeling about human life. It is not the big things he cares for in either. Just as his human sympathy goes out to the weak and poor, and not to the kings and heroes, so he loves chiefly the frail and delicate things of nature. And that fills him with a kind of anxious and brooding tenderness, for the things which he loves best of all are just those, as he cannot but see, that are fated in their fragile beauty to be only too soon and too certainly swallowed up in

Le vaste enclos qu'ont les royaumes sombres.

The rare suggestions he gives of a larger imagination are all visions of the gulf of destruction, like those splendid lines about the lost seekers of new worlds which, after his fashion of mixing grave and gay, come to startle us into a kind of awe at the end of *Le Ricur et les Poissons* :

un monstre assez vieux pour lui dire  
Tous les noms des chercheurs de mondes inconnus  
Qui n'en étaient pas revenus,  
Et qui depuis cent ans sous l'abîme avaient vus  
Les anciens du vaste empire.

Still, no doubt it is not mainly as a man who saw visions or dreamed dreams that we remember La Fontaine, but as a man who saw life and understood men. His poems are a mine of pictures of his day

and his world. There are the monks of Orbais, in the *Epistle to Fouquet*, who complained in winter that the short days left them no time to get through their . . . meals! There are the dean (*personne fort prudente*), and the chapter, of the rats, who found talking so easy and doing so difficult; the little princes, whom he advises to settle their disputes among themselves, and not call the kings in to help them, like the silly peasant who called in his landlord and his dogs to drive a troublesome hare out of his garden; the courtiers, whom it is best not to change, because the old ones have already grown fat on the public purse, whereas new ones will arrive lean and hungry; the gout, which lodged, poor thing, with a peasant, and was much shaken and disturbed by his stoopings and stretchings and goings and comings, and had no peace till it went to live with a bishop, whom it was quite possible to keep snug in bed all day; the roads in Basse Bretagne, where fate sends people whom it wants to see out of temper, and which make La Fontaine say, *Dieu nous préserve du voyage*; the Court of which, as I said just now, he never conceals his dislike, so that he calls it

Un pays où les gens,  
Tristes, gais, prêts à tout, à tout indifférents,  
Sont ce qu'il plaît au prince, ou s'ils ne peuvent l'être,  
Tâchent au moins de le paraître :  
Peuple caméléon, peuple singe du maître ;

a description true, no doubt, to some extent of all Courts, but never so completely true of any as of that of Louis XIV., who, as Saint-Simon shows, required all about him to appear to enjoy immensely whatever he told them to do. Even the king him-



self, one may say, appears there, for who could fail to think of Louis XIV. when he read La Fontaine's moralising over man wishing for the impossible :—

Combien fait-il de vœux ? combien perd-il de pas,  
S'outiant pour acquérir des biens ou de la gloire !  
Si j'arrondissais mes états !  
Si je pouvais remplir mes coffres de ducats !

or again, when he says—

Rien ne remplit  
Les vastes appétits d'un faiseur de conquêtes.

Truly did he call his fables *une ample comédie à cent actes divers*. They are the pictures of his own time first of all, but also of our time, and of every time. He saw life for himself and at first hand, and sketches it with a freshness and force which belong only to original personalities. No wonder Louis XIV. did not like him. The man who carried political and social make-believe to an unapproached and indeed unapproachable point could not like the clear-eyed satirist, with his awkward turn for seeing things as they really were.

There are fifty things in La Fontaine that one would like to linger over ; but, in this imperfect world, we are obliged to be the obedient servants of those inexorable masters, time and space. I should like to go into the charm of his style, its ease, its variety, its wealth of pleasant surprises :

On ne s'attendait guère  
De voir Ulysse en cette affaire ;

its grave ironic under-statements,

Éconduire un lion rarement se pratique ;

its wise observation, its never-failing fountain of humour, its masterly simplicity. Above all I should like to try to analyse his treatment of the animal world, and find out why all other animals seem dull and dead by the side of his; but I can only say that his secret seems to me to be that, far more than any other fabulist, he endows his creatures with humanity and personality, giving them human thoughts and feelings and fancies, without touching a hair of their animal bodies. They may be clothed in lions' skins or pigeons' feathers, but the hearts that beat underneath are human hearts. That is the only way. We can never know much more than the outside of animals: the only inner life we can imagine is our own. All the fables, except the purely human ones, are illustrations of this method of La Fontaine's. Take for instance that of the rat who has retired from the world. The place in which he found repose from the cares of the world was a Dutch cheese. There he found board and lodging, and he even grew fat and full-bodied—'so good is God to those who vow themselves to his service.' One day some ambassadors who were journeying from Ratispolis, then besieged by the cats, to seek help from a distant people, and were very short of money, came to ask our holy hermit (*dévot personnage*) for alms.

Mes amis, dit le solitaire,  
Les choses d'ici bas ne me regardent plus :  
En quoi peut un pauvre reclus  
Vous assister ? que peut-il faire,  
Que de prier le ciel qu'il vous aide en ceci ?  
J'espère qu'il aura de vous quelque souci.  
Ayant parlé de cette sorte  
Le nouveau saint ferma sa porte.

And La Fontaine's charming note of conclusion—

Que désigné-je à votre avis  
Par ce rat si peu secourable ?  
Un moine ? Non, mais un dervis :  
Je suppose qu'un moine est toujours charitable.

I have been obliged to omit several delightful touches. And the piece is not properly a fable; but how perfect it is! The balance here certainly leans to the human side; but the rat is still a real rat, using his feet and teeth, we are told, to make board and lodging out of the cheese, and it is just that which makes him so amusing as a monk. And then how stinging the satire is, lightly as he lays it on! A monk could hardly wince more under the lash of Erasmus, especially where he came to the final explanation so characteristic of La Fontaine, that of course he was only thinking of a dervish after all.

Or take another example: 'The Man and the Adder.' Well might La Fontaine say his book was a comedy of a hundred different scenes: here is a whole comedy in a single fable. Human vanity, self-will, self-righteousness, and self-deception, they are all there, a whole Egoist in miniature: and the pathos of unregarded service and suffering is there too; the human-hearted animals pleading with human eloquence their own cause and with it the cause of all the victims of the world, and getting the old answer which victims have always got. And then there is the saving humour which keeps the whole a comedy and not a pamphlet or a sermon! This is the story. A man catches an adder and is about to kill it:—

Ah ! méchante, dit-il, je m'en vais faire une œuvre  
Agréable à tout l'univers.

His special complaint against it is that it is the type of ingratitude, to which the adder replies that it is, on the contrary, man who is the most ungrateful creature in the universe. They agree that a cow shall decide between them. Her judgment is soon given :—

Fallait-il pour cela, dit-elle, m'appeler ?  
La couleuvre a raison : pourquoi dissimuler ?  
Je nourris celui-ci depuis longues années :  
Il n'a sans mes bienfaits passé nulles journées ;  
Tout n'est que pour lui seul : mon lait et mes enfants  
Le font à la maison revenir les mains pleines,  
Même j'ai rétabli sa santé, que les ans

Avaient altérée : et mes peines

Ont pour but son plaisir ainsi que son besoin.  
Enfin me voilà vieille : il me laisse en un coin  
Sans herbe : s'il voulait encor me laisser paître !  
Mais je suis attachée : et si j'eusse eu pour maître  
Un serpent, eût-il su jamais pousser si loin  
L'ingratitude ? Adieu : j'ai dit ce que je pense.  
L'homme, tout étonné d'une telle sentence,  
Dit au serpent : Faut-il croire ce qu'elle dit !  
C'est une radoteuse : elle a perdu l'esprit  
Croyons ce bœuf. Croyons, dit la rampante bête.  
Ainsi dit, ainsi fait. Le bœuf vint à pas lents.  
Quand il eut ruminé tout le cas en sa tête,

Il dit que du labeur des ans

Pour nous seuls il portait les soins les plus pesants,  
Parcourant sans cesser ce long cercle de peines  
Qui, revenant sur soi, ramenait dans nos plaines  
Ce que Cérès nous donne et vend aux animaux :

Que cette suite de travaux

Pour récompense avait, de tous tant que nous sommes,  
Force coups, peu de gré : puis, quand il était vieux,  
On croyait l'honorer chaque fois que les hommes  
Achetaient de son sang l'indulgence des dieux.  
Ainsi parla le bœuf. L'homme dit : Faisons taire

Cet ennuyeux déclamateur :

Il cherche de grands mots, et vient ici se faire,  
Au lieu d'arbitre, accusateur.

And so he goes on, after a similar judgment from the tree, to refuse any more pleadings and kill the adder without further ado. On which the poet comments—

On en use ainsi chez les grands :  
La raison les offense ; ils se mettent en tête  
Que tout est né pour eux, quadrupèdes et gens  
Et serpents.

Si quelqu'un desserre les dents,  
C'est un sot. J'en conviens : mais que faut-il donc faire ?  
Parler de loin ou bien se taire.

How wonderfully it is all put on the stage! The fable has become a Conte, or rather the Morality a Drama. Each character is at once a type and a personality; the man, above all, is the very incarnation of assured and complacent egoism, and yet how individual and alive he is! How humorously vivid is his disappointment at the verdict:

C'est une radoteuse : elle a perdu l'esprit.  
—Faisons taire  
Cet ennuyeux déclamateur.

All this is the human side. But there is an animal side too. How excellently the heavy, lumbering gait of the bull is given in the rhythm of the line which announces his arrival—

Le bœuf vint à pas lents :

and his whole method of procedure is suggested in the touch that speaks of his *ruminant tout le cas en sa tête*. It is these touches of detail that convert an abstraction into an individual. When La Fontaine talks of a donkey going along a road

Gravement sans songer à rien

the creature is before our eyes at once like Shakespeare's Dogberry with his 'two gowns and everything handsome about him.' But I dare not go on quoting. If I were to please myself I should not stop till I had given all my other favourites that I have not managed to allude to. *Le Meunier, son Fils et l'Âne, Le Jardinier et son Seigneur, L'Œil du Maître, La Vicille et les deux Servantes, L'Âne et ses Maîtres, La Jeune Veuve, Les Animaux Malades de la Peste, La Fille, Le Coche et la Mouche, Le Curé et le Mort, La Mort et le Mourant, Le Savetier et le Financier, Les Femmes et le Secret, Le Cochon, la Chèvre et le Mouton, Le Loup et les Bergers*; and this lengthy list is only a few of them, after all! I am tempted to indulge myself with one more even now. Almost all that I have spoken of have been animal stories, but there are many that are solely and avowedly human! These are the *Contes* that can be read in the drawing-room, or even in the schoolroom: will and must be read, indeed, by all lovers of wise and pleasant things, so long as human beings delight in observing humanity, and enjoy good stories incomparably told. Here is one of them: *La Jeune Veuve*:

La perte d'un époux ne va point sans soupirs :  
 On fait beaucoup de bruit, et puis on se console.  
 Sur les ailes du Temps la tristesse s'envole :  
     Le Temps ramène les plaisirs.  
     Entre la veuve d'une année  
     Et la veuve d'une journée  
 La différence est grande : on ne croirait jamais  
     Que ce fût la même personne ;  
 L'une fait fuir les gens, et l'autre a mille attraits :  
 Aux soupirs vrais ou faux celle-là s'abandonne ;  
     C'est toujours même note et pareil entretien.  
 On dit qu'on est inconsolable :  
 On le dit ; mais il n'en est rien,

Comme on verra par cette fable,  
Ou plutôt par la vérité.

L'époux d'une jeune beauté  
Partait pour l'autre monde. A ses côtés sa femme  
Lui criait : Attends-moi, je te suis ; et mon âme,  
Aussi bien que la tienne, est prête à s'envoler.

Le mari fait seul le voyage.  
La belle avait un père, homme prudent et sage ;  
Il laissa le torrent couler.

A la fin, pour la consoler :  
Ma fille, lui dit-il, c'est trop verser de larmes :  
Qu'a besoin le défunt que vous noyiez vos charmes ?  
Puisqu'il est des vivants, ne songez plus aux morts.

Je ne dis pas que tout à l'heure  
Une condition meilleure  
Change en des noces ces transports :  
Mais après certain temps souffrez qu'on vous propose  
Un époux beau, bien fait, jeune et tout autre chose

Que le défunt. Ah ! dit-elle aussitôt,  
Un cloître est l'époux qu'il me faut.

Le père lui laissa digérer sa disgrâce.

Un mois de la sorte se passe ;  
L'autre mois on l'emploie à changer tous les jours  
Quelque chose à l'habit, au linge, à la coiffure :

Le deuil enfin sert de parure,  
En attendant d'autres atours.

Toute la bande des Amours  
Revient au colombier ; les jeux, les ris, la danse,  
Ont aussi leur tour à la fin :

On se plonge soir et matin  
Dans la fontaine de Jouvence.

Le père ne craint plus ce défunt tant chéri ;  
Mais comme il ne parlait de rien à notre belle :

Où donc est le jeune mari  
Que vous m'avez promis ? dit-elle.

Could anything be more perfect? It is a novel in miniature. One hopes Jane Austen was given a La Fontaine in her nursery: if so, one may be sure she was not long in learning him by heart. But, after all, of the many delightful personages, beasts and birds, and men and women, that fill the

*Fables*, the most delightful of all is the poet himself, who is not in this one or that, but in them all. There he is, the lover of the poor,

Hélas ! on voit que de tout temps  
Les petits ont pâti des sottises des grands :

the lover of his friends,

Qu'un ami véritable est une douce chose :

the lover, indeed, of all innocent and pleasant things, as he confesses in the charming ode to Volupté at the end of his *Amours de Psyché*:

J'aime le jeu, l'amour, les livres, la musique,  
La ville et la campagne, enfin tout : il n'est rien  
Qui ne me soit souverain bien,  
Jusqu'au sombre plaisir d'un cœur mélancolique.

That is, no doubt, the nemesis that awaits even the most innocent of Epicureans: *sedet atra cura*. But, where the innocence is as gay and persistent as La Fontaine's, it can even convert melancholy into a pleasure: and, after a regretful confession that all bright things are short-lived, and youth and joy the frailest of all, after the vain reproach,

Hélas ! les belles destinées  
Ne devaient aller que le pas,

he can turn back at once to his own cheerful and rational, if too limited, philosophy:

Quittez le long espoir et les vastes pensées :

and, refusing to listen to stoical persons, who would have us 'stop living before we are dead,' or to misers, for whom he has the double hatred of the man of pleasure and of the poet, or to the adventurers of ambition, who run round the world in search of



Fortune, only to find her after all in their own village sitting side by side with their old friend who dreams and dozes in his garden chair, can give himself to the simple and common pleasures which are not far from the best as well as the easiest, caring more about being than about doing, always happy himself, always a cause of happiness to every one about him; a man whom every one loved, and himself a generous lover of all lovable people and things. With one exception, indeed. Strangely enough, he who loved all beautiful things, he who was himself all his life a child, who would quite have entered into the wondering question of Stevenson's childhood, 'O why can we not all be happy and devote ourselves to play?' did not love children. One would have expected that he, of all men, would have been surest to delight in the most exquisite of God's creations. But, somehow or other, it was not so. He hardly knew his own son when he met him. Racine's daughters remembered him only as tiresome and dull: and when he speaks of a boy in his fables, it is as

Certain enfant qui sentait son collège,  
Doublement sot et doublement fripon  
Par le jeune âge et par le privilège  
Qu'ont les pédants de gâter la raison.

And he adds, in giving his moral—

Je ne sais bête au monde pire  
Que l'écolier, si ce n'est le pédant.  
Le meilleur de ces deux pour voisin, à vrai dire,  
Ne me plairait aucunement.

But we can none of us be perfect, and if La Fontaine had loved children he would have been perfect

in all the lesser virtues. And, with all deductions made, he is, as I said, one of the pleasantest figures to think of in literary history. Tiresome as Mademoiselle Racine found it, we should like to have been present when he 'would not talk of anything but Plato,' whom indeed he called *le plus grand des amuseurs*: nor are we much surprised that he greatly disliked Aristotle. And we are amused to think of him going to present his book to Louis XIV., and finding when he got to Versailles that he had left the book at home, and then crowning the day's adventures by losing on his way back the purse the king had given him; or being sent a horse that he might ride at once to Paris to see about a lawsuit, and meeting a friend a few miles outside the city, and getting into such interesting talk about books that he forgets his business and stays the night with his friend, and, when he arrives too late next day, says he is very glad at bottom that he did forget all about it, for he neither likes talking of business himself nor hearing other people talk of it; and when we read such stories we are not surprised that he tells Phædrus's fable in such a way as to win all our sympathies, not for the wise ant, but for the careless cicada. His is by no means a great or imposing figure, but, if we will forget to be severe moralists, it is one of the most lovable we know. He is never angry, he is never insincere, he is never prosy, he is never dull. In his ample playhouse there is room and entertainment for us all. He has his place by the side of his friend Molière, greater man, greater writer, but not greater poet, than he. The two men understood each other from the first. 'Voilà mon

homme,' said La Fontaine at his first sight of one of Molière's plays: 'nos beaux esprits ont beau se tremousser,' said Molière when people laughed at La Fontaine; 'ils ne parviendront pas à effacer le bon-homme.' No compliment would have pleased La Fontaine better than to be told that he stands for ever by Molière as one of the greatest pleasure-givers of all time and all countries. But it is not a compliment: it is the truth.

ANDRÉ CHÉNIER

## ANDRÉ CHÉNIER

LA FONTAINE died in 1695, and with him poetry, as distinct from the making of verses, passed away from France for a hundred years. Thought took the place of imagination, wit of beauty, ingenuity of strength, philosophy of poetry. The mind of France did a great work for the world in the eighteenth century, but it was not by poetry that it did it. The poetic decay is seen in the substitution of the drama of Voltaire for the tragedies of Corneille and Racine; and still more in that of the odes of J. B. Rousseau for the fables and lyrics of La Fontaine. On the whole, it is a period in French history which, whatever its interest in other respects, the student of poetry feels inclined to leave alone. But such periods cannot last for ever in any nation which is still alive; and of how much life there was, seething in volcanic energy under the smooth parterres of the age of Louis xv., the Revolution is the everlasting witness. And the Revolution has its poet, a poet who found in it his inspiration, and then, as is the way of those who deal with Revolutions, his death. Strangely enough this poet, so intimately bound up with the greatest event in French history, was only half a Frenchman, and had been ten years in the world before he set foot on French soil. Perhaps that helped him to break away from

the literary traditions that had ruled France for a century. Perhaps it is the reason why foreigners have found him easier to appreciate than some French poets of greater fame. Anyhow, there is the fact. This short-lived boy, whose mother was a Greek, who spent so many of his few years on foreign soil, who published scarcely anything in his lifetime, is now seen to be the one glory of French poetry in the age of the Revolution. And, as I said, his is a glory that foreigners do not find it hard to recognise. Somehow, I think, he is better known in England than men much more famous. At any rate I have found people who read very little French of any kind, and scarcely any French poetry, who yet know something of the poet who was one of the victims of the guillotine. Perhaps it is that tragic story which wins him sympathy, and, from that, an attention he would not otherwise receive. The world has always been touched by genius dying young, and always will be; but that can hardly be the whole secret of the fascination so many have found in these fragments of verse, and, for my part, if I were asked, not what were the greatest books of French poetry, but what were the best for an Englishman to begin with, I am not sure I should not answer, first the *Fables* of La Fontaine, and, then, the little volume which contains all the work of André Chénier.

The story of his life is well known, and soon told. He was born in 1762, at Constantinople, of a French father and a Greek mother. The place of his birth and the nationality of his mother were of immense importance in influencing the direction which his

poetic talent took. The language which the northern scholar acquires by years of labour was Chénier's birthright, learnt from his mother, and in its native home. And so not merely the history and the legends of Greece—of which he was full—but Greek simplicity, Greek reality, Greek directness of presentation, became part of his nature from the first, and indicated to him his special poetic task from the moment that he began to write. He was brought back to France in early boyhood, and entered the Collège de Navarre at Paris in 1773. There he remained for some years, showing very early that he had inherited his mother's sensitive intelligence and her enthusiastic appreciation of all things beautiful. The development in him of a certain stiffness of character, which came from his father, was to follow later, helped in its growth, no doubt, by the fashionable admiration of the great Roman heroes and of the Stoic ideal. When he left school he devoted some years, like Milton and Spenser, to quiet study and travel. He was in the army for a few months; but he had no military tastes, and the only thing he seems to have enjoyed in the time he spent at Strassburg was the acquaintance it gave him the opportunity of making with the great scholar Brunck, whose Greek Anthology furnished him with many of the sources of his poetry. He next tried diplomacy, and was secretary at the French Embassy in London; but he was not much happier in England than at Strassburg. He made some acquaintance with our literature, and especially admired Milton; and we find him later imitating Ophelia's song in *Hamlet* in one of his poems, and speaking in another of

Spenser's 'sweet pictures and touching strains.' But the prevalent fashions in English literature at that time were not much to his taste: he found English society exclusive and reserved, he felt himself an exile, and he had not enough work to do at the Embassy to keep him from melancholy. Indeed he had so little to do that in his pride he wanted to refuse his salary, and only accepted it in the end under great pressure from the Ambassador. He returned to France in the spring of 1790, and was soon plunged in the political excitements of the time. Like most thoughtful and intelligent men, he enthusiastically welcomed the Revolution; but he rapidly became disgusted with the excesses of the revolutionary party. Even in his great ode, *Le Jeu de Paume*, written in 1790, he is fully conscious of the dangers that were already threatening the cause of true liberty and the life of the young constitution; and the later stanzas, with their solemn note of warning—

Peuple ! ne croyons pas que tout nous soit permis.

Craignez vos courtisans avides,

O peuple souverain ! A votre oreille admis,

Cent orateurs bourreaux se nomment vos amis.

Ils soufflent des feux homicides—

are in curious contrast to the earlier ones, with their jubilant strain of unhesitating welcome of the new order of things. Not that he had ceased to believe in the necessity and justice of the great change—he believed in it to the end; but he had come to find out, as others like him were finding out too, that it was by no means such a simple thing as they had supposed to substitute in a moment a new world for an old. The cup of liberty is a wholesome draught



in the end, but its first effects are too often of a disturbing character. Of this Chénier became more and more aware; and his position gradually became one of open opposition to the Jacobin leaders. He attacked them by name in his articles in the *Moniteur*, and he used his poetic gifts with effect against them on more than one occasion. The first of these is interesting, as destined to prove the immediate cause of his death. A certain regiment had mutinied and robbed the regimental chest, and had been sentenced to the galleys in consequence, when, to the amazement of all honest people, not only was an amnesty granted them, but it was actually proposed to honour them with a triumphal entry into Paris. Against this astounding proposal Chénier wrote his severely satirical *Hymne sur l'entrée triomphale des Suisses révoltés*, which it appears was never forgiven, and secured his death when it was made an article of accusation against him. The other occasion in which his political sentiments could only be satisfied with poetic utterance was on the assassination of Marat, when he wrote the famous ode to Charlotte Corday. But by that time his political activity was practically over; for with the execution of Louis XVI., in whose defence he assisted, the moderate party was completely defeated, and he was obliged to retire from Paris. He spent most of 1793 at Rouen and at Versailles, writing verses, and deep in all sorts of studies. At Versailles he made the acquaintance of Madame Le Coulteux, the 'Fanny' of his poems, who lived close by. He worked all day and took his verses to her in the evening; and his friendship with her and her family seems to have been the great

happiness of this part of his life. Gradually he came to think he was forgotten, and in no further danger; but he had not long returned to Paris before he was arrested, almost it seems by accident, while paying a visit to some friends at Passy. This was on the 7th of March, 1794. He was taken to Saint-Lazare, which he found crowded with members of that brilliant society which he had known only a year or two before in such different circumstances in his mother's *salon*. Once there, the only hope was that he might be forgotten; and this was the object of his brother Marie Joseph who had influence with the revolutionary leaders. Marie Joseph arranged with Barrère to keep André's name off the fatal list of those for trial; and there is no doubt that he would have escaped among the crowd of prisoners if his father, indignant at his unjust imprisonment, had not insisted on calling attention to his case and demanding his release. The only result was that he was immediately tried; and trials during the Terror had but one conclusion. He was condemned on the 7th of Thermidor (24th July) 1794, and executed the next day. On the 26th Robespierre fell, and the Terror was at an end. It is easy to imagine the agony of poor Marie Joseph, who was in the secret of the plot against Robespierre, when he read in a newspaper that his brother, whom he was reasonably hoping to find free in a few days, had been executed in the last hours of the tyranny; and it is difficult to blame him for his momentary outburst of bitter reproaches when he learnt from his father that it had been he who, in spite of all warnings, had by his unfortunate interference brought about poor André's

fate. 'Ah! the scoundrels!' cried the father when he heard the news; 'this is not what they promised me! they said justice should be done to my appeal! the scoundrels!' Marie Joseph did not realise for a moment what his father meant; then, struck with terror, he asked, 'What do you mean? promise? who has promised? you presented an appeal? to whom? when? explain!' The father could but confess; and the son could not refrain from a torrent of cruel reproaches, till his father cried, 'My dear son, do not overwhelm me; I am indeed unhappy'; and Marie Joseph threw himself into his father's arms and asked his forgiveness. The unfortunate father never got over the terrible knowledge that he had brought about his son's death, and only survived him about ten months.

There is a story that, as the young poet was led to the scaffold, he said to his companion, 'I leave nothing for posterity; and yet,' he added, touching his forehead, 'I had something there.' One can understand his agony. He was only thirty-one, and his poetic gift was ripening fast. He had spent a good deal of his time at Saint-Lazare in writing verses, which he contrived to send out to his father rolled up in his linen week by week; and nothing he had written in happier days equals the force of *La Jeune Captive* and the *Iambes*. The latter are, in fact, among the very grandest pieces of political poetry in any language; and to find a parallel to their severe and lofty patriotism, their passionate energy, their concentration of thought and purpose, their vigour and splendour of imagination, we must go to Dante and hear him pour out his just anger and sorrow over the

city he had loved so well; or to Milton, and hear him pray, as only he could pray, for divine vengeance on the murderers of Piedmont's 'slaughtered saints.' Such work, done in the midst of all the miseries of prison life, and so seldom descending, in spite of the enormous temptation, to mere personal abuse of his enemies, or indeed to anything unworthy of the high mission he had set himself, as the vindicator of outraged France, is the proof of a rare intensity of poetic faculty, and the measure of what the literature of his country lost by his death.

That loss, for the moment, passed unnoticed. Not only was France too distracted by politics to be able to think of poetry just then, but no one, outside the circle of his own friends, had had any opportunity of recognising Chénier's genius. He had published hardly anything; a couple of odes, however fine, are not enough to found a poetic reputation, except indeed among the discerning few; and it was natural that he should be regarded more as a politician than as a poet. He remained accordingly very little known, though his family issued several of his more striking poems, till the first edition of his works appeared in 1819. It was an auspicious moment, and Chénier's position as one of the great poets of his country was at once recognised. It has never since been assailed, and he is now one of the admitted French classics, and has received the classical honour of a critical edition by M. Becq de Fouquières of which the final instalment appeared in 1875. This edition was fiercely assailed in one produced by M. Gabriel Chénier, a kinsman of the poet; but subsequent editors, such as Raoul Guillard and

Eugène Manuel, admit that Becq de Fouquières' work is the foundation of their own, and his book still the indispensable edition of the poet. For the English reader the most convenient edition is probably that in the well-known *Petite Charpentier* series which was also prepared by the same M. Becq de Fouquières.

Let us assume that the English reader takes up this stout but pleasant and well-printed little volume, with a view to making some acquaintance with André Chénier. What will he find in it? There are some four hundred and seventy pages, and they include nearly everything that Chénier left behind him, much of it, unfortunately, in an unfinished and even fragmentary condition. But, when all mediocre work has been set aside, enough remains to attest Chénier's real greatness.

Poetic greatness is not an easy thing to analyse; but certain elements in it are easily recognised, and among these are worthiness of subject and perfection of treatment. The latter is no doubt the more important: one can hardly, for instance, imagine any subject which, treated by Horace or La Fontaine, could not be delightful; while the grandest theme in the world will not help the man who has only conceived it but cannot treat it. Still, both are of real value, and Chénier can lay some claim to the possession of both. He is indeed in a peculiar position, both as to what he has to say and how he says it. Saturated as his mind and memory were with Greek poetry and Greek story, he could not but reflect the classics both in his choice of subject and in his method of treatment, and accordingly the

principal poem published in his lifetime, *Le Jeu de Paume*, was called by Mr. Henley 'one of the most Pindaric of modern odes,' and the bulk of his collected works consists of two great divisions, which he styles *Bucoliques* and *Élégies*. But it is just at this point that his poetic genius exhibits itself. He saw, not consciously perhaps, but none the less really, that the poetic art of his country was being strangled by antiquated rules and traditions. The life was gone out of it, and it was nothing more than a machine continuing to revolve after the hand that set it going had been removed. The Scribes and Pharisees of the established tradition were for ever declaring that the great Greek and Latin classics were their models. The proclamation, then, which Chénier in effect made in his poetry was, 'You appeal to Greece; to Greece you shall go.' It was not in any revolutionary way that he would solve the difficulty of giving new life to the poetry of his country; rather it was by an application of the very principles of the dominant school—an application, however, not dry, unreal, and traditional, but living and spiritual. The classics were to provide the solution; and we find him building both his style and matter largely on their foundation. But the superstructure is his own. He saw clearly enough that no modern poet worthy of the name can submit to be bound by the limitations of the ancients, and that his business is to tell the tale of to-day in the spirit, and, if it may be, with the power of Greece and Rome. As he puts it in his poem *L'Invention*:—

Allumons nos flambeaux à leurs feux poétiques,  
Sur des pensers nouveaux faisons des vers antiques.

His danger, he felt, and was certainly right in feeling, was that he should keep too close to his masters, and he tells himself to

Faire, en s'éloignant d'eux avec un soin jaloux,  
Ce qu'eux-mêmes ils feraient, s'ils vivaient parmi nous.

He could not have set himself a higher task. To write an epic, not as Homer wrote the *Iliad*, but as he would have written the epic of to-day, to make a triumphal ode which shall be not an imitation but a re-creation of Pindar,—these are ambitions to which the highest poetic talent may well apply itself. The first thing, then, to remember about Chénier is that he is half a Greek, and that his importance in the history of French literature lies, to a large extent, in the success with which he applied the Greek directness, the Greek sense of form—in a word, the Greek spirit—to the restoration of French poetry. And, conscious of his genius, he is not afraid of proposing to himself ambitious schemes. One may almost say that he aims at being at once the Pindar, the Lucretius, the Theocritus, and in a sense even the Aristophanes, of his country. It is not given, even to genius, to attain complete success in such various fields; but he shows real power in all, and that is no small thing to say.

His work, as we have it, is divided into several classes: Bucolics, Elegies, Epistles, Dramatic fragments, Odes, Iambes (a word which the Latin and English 'Satire' is too weak to render), and Miscellaneous Poems. The considerable bulk of poetic work indicated by such a list as this is itself evidence of great power in a man who died at thirty-one. But

the variety of his work is even stronger evidence of his gifts than the amount. It is a wide field that stretches from the pure art, instinct only with the desire of doing a beautiful thing, which makes the best of the *Bucolics* like a collection of Greek reliefs, to the burning political heat of the *Iambes*: and it is a great achievement to have covered it so early in life. Great as his variety of style is—ranging from the facility of the elegy to the severity of the ode—he is always clear, vigorous, and pointed. He deals boldly with very different subjects, and makes his appeal to readers of very varying tastes: to the artistic temperament in the *Bucolics*, to the patriotic or political in the *Odes* and *Iambes*, to the sentimental or feminine in the *Elegies*, to the critical in *L'Invention*. But through all changes of style and subject he never fails to make us aware of a mind and nature of real distinction, large and rich and sensitive to noble influences from all sides, whether they arose from beauty in art or poetry or the external world, or from the enthusiasms that were seething in the society around him, from

Exultations, agonies,  
And love, and man's unconquerable mind.

The first things in the volume are the two odes which he published himself. One is the bitterly sarcastic *Hymne* for the triumphal entry of the mutinous soldiers whom Collot d'Herbois wished to honour. It is chiefly remarkable for the courage it displays, and for the fact that, as I have mentioned, the recollection of it seems to have helped to give a motive for Chénier's execution. The other is the splendid *Jeu de Paume*, one of the finest



political odes in all literature, and certainly the grandest expression of all that was highest in the national awakening which led to the French Revolution. It takes its name from the tennis-court at Versailles in which the States-General met in 1789. Addressed to David, the painter, it opens with an appeal to poetry, *jeune et divine poésie*, to unite with the other arts in celebrating the new birth of Liberty. And, as it were incidentally, it asserts, what indeed every stanza of it proves, that a new era of freedom is to begin in art as well as in politics.

Toi-même, belle vierge à la touchante voix,  
 Nymphé ailée, aimable sirène,  
 Ta langue s'amollit dans les palais des rois,  
 Ta hauteur se rabaisse, et d'enfantines lois  
 Oppriment ta marche incertaine ;  
 Ton feu n'est que lueur, ta beauté n'est que fard.  
 La liberté du génie et de l'art  
 T'ouvre tous les trésors.'

Never had pen or pencil a nobler subject, he goes on to say, than now. Then follows, described in three or four vigorous and telling stanzas, the story of the meeting, the attempted suppression, the refusal to separate, and finally the destruction of the Bastille and the rise of Liberty out of its ruins.

Et de ces grands tombeaux, la belle liberté  
 Altière, étincelante, armée,  
 Sort.

The effect of this word *sort*, placed as it is not merely at the beginning of a fresh line but at the head of a fresh stanza, can only be appreciated by reading the passage. And can it be merely an accident that the division between these two stanzas is also the division between two equal halves of the

ode? It is difficult to think so, though I know of no French critic who remarks upon it. To me at least it seems as if the poet, in placing this word in what, considering French metrical traditions, is such an astonishing and daring position, intended to mark it as the turning-point of his ode, of the great story he is telling, and of the other revolution he knew he was accomplishing in the literature of his country. The child liberty is born, the victory won, he seems to proclaim as with the sound of a trumpet, and it is a victory the effect of which shall be felt in all fields alike. And indeed the rest of the poem is in a different key. The outburst of exaltation once over, the note soon becomes one of grave and earnest warning. It is easy to win the battle, easier still to sing the song of triumph; the hard and high thing is to learn to use the victory aright.

Il vous reste à borner et les autres et vous,  
Il vous reste à savoir descendre.

Moderation, wisdom, justice, are the supreme needs of the State, lest it should fall a prey to the two factions, revolutionary on this side, reactionary on that, who are ready to tear it in pieces.

L'un du nom de sujet, l'autre de citoyen,  
Masque son âme inique et de vice flétrie;  
L'un sur l'autre acharnés, ils comptent tous pour rien  
Liberté, vérité, patrie.

And in that strain he concludes his appeal to the infant Revolution not to be its own destruction.

It is easy to point out faults in the ode,—its boyish affectation of classical allusion, for instance, and its exaggerated indulgence in the new-won

freedom of breaking up the lines and placing the pauses where he will; but no one who has an ear for such things can avoid being struck by its unfailing tone of lofty patriotism, and by its command of language, in which that patriotism finds fit and even splendid utterance.

Of the *Bucolics* or *Idylls* there are about a hundred, the large majority of which are fragmentary. In them of course it is no longer the patriot, but the artist pure and simple, that we see. In the best of them is to be found the most perfect work Chénier lived to do. They are, for the most part, narrative poems, set in Greek surroundings, and in style have more affinity with the epic than with the eclogue. Naturally enough, and perhaps deliberately, he begins with Homer, *L'Aveugle*, the first of them, being a finely imagined picture of the blind poet, cast in his wanderings on the island of Scyros. This is followed by *Le Mendiant*, *L'Esclave*, and *Le Malade*, all wonderful things, which with the famous *Jeune Tarentine* are the finest of the *Bucoliques*. In them Chénier manages with complete success to throw into Greek scenery, and among Greek personages, a sentiment and passion which are modern—which even anticipate the nineteenth century—and into French verse a reality and spontaneity it had long lost. They have the special characteristic of great poetry, in creating an atmosphere for themselves, in carrying us with them into their world. They do not lend themselves to quotation, but neither do many of the most perfect things in literature. *Idylls*, in particular, rarely do. No quotation can give the measure

of the grave northern beauty of Wordsworth's *Michael*, or, again, of the softness, the strangeness, the airy southern delicacy, of such a thing as Landor's *Hamadryad*. The fact is that we are apt to immensely overrate the importance of the details that can be quoted: the really supreme thing in a poem, as in every other work of art, is completeness and unity of effect. And so with Chénier's Idylls. It is not by containing, but by being, beautiful things that they hold their high place in French poetry.

After these, the most remarkable pieces among the *Bucoliques* are in a style the possibilities of which were to be shown in our own time by M. de Heredia, whose consummate mastery of it, exhibited in a single volume, earned him an immediate place in the French Academy. They are, that is to say, what I may call reliefs of Greek gods and heroes, scenes imagined with the utmost simplicity, and executed with quiet perfection. The common defect of modern art as compared with ancient is its anxiety to assert itself. It has an air as of a man trying to address a crowd which does not care to hear him: it must lift up its voice perforce; it must, as it were, strive and cry in the market-place. The great works of ancient art breathe a spirit which is the very opposite of this: they seem to have no thought of readers or spectators; they exist for themselves and their own end. M. de Heredia has shown in his wonderful sonnets what triumphs can be achieved in this style even in modern times; and Chénier, though he never attains to the absolute detachment of spirit

which is Heredia's special note, has left a number of pieces which are in their measure anticipations of his work. We have here, for instance, at the beginning of those headed 'Fragments of Idylls,' twenty or twenty-five pictures taken from Greek story, prayers to Diana and Proserpine, marked by all the admirable simplicity of Greek prayers; or, again, scenes from the myths of Hercules and Bacchus. We have the picture and nothing more: they are not charged with an atmosphere like *L'Aveugle* and the earlier pieces. It is a few lines cut in white marble, and that is all. These, again, do not invite quotation, but I will give the last lines from one on the death of Hercules, which, it may be remarked, owes very little to the passage in Ovid which some editors give as its original:

Il y porte la flamme ; il monte, sous ses pieds  
 Étend du vieux lion la dépouille héroïque,  
 Et l'œil au ciel, la main sur la massue antique,  
 Attend sa récompense et l'heure d'être un dieu.  
 Le vent souffle et mugit. Le bûcher tout en feu  
 Brille autour du héros, et la flamme rapide  
 Porte au palais divin l'âme du grand Alcide !

Surely the reserve and severity of style which these lines exhibit is as admirable as it is rare in a poet so young ; and all the more admirable for the subtle impression it somehow creates of abundance and facility lying ready behind.

The Elegies are less interesting than the Bucolics. Like them, they are frequently imitations of Greek or Roman poems, but, while they exhibit the same charm and spontaneity of style, they want the distinction of *Le Mendiant* and the little Greek *Idylls*.

of which I have spoken. They may be described in a line from one of them, in which he wishes

Que mes écrits  
Soient un code d'amour, de plaisir, de tendresse ;

and their sentiment is apt to become rather monotonous. The most interesting are those which have most of that personal note about them which Coleridge said was the essence of elegy,—confessions of the poet's hopes and plans, and assertions, far more sincere in his case than usual, of his indifference to wealth and fame, and preference for a life of retirement spent in the enjoyment of the pleasures of nature and art. He cannot write on high subjects, he tells his friends: Venus has named him her poet, and he delights in her service :—

Les forêts d'Idalie ont des routes si belles.

For the rest, the life he chooses is one of quiet and study :—

J'ai su, pauvre et content, savourer à longs traits  
Les muses, les plaisirs, et l'étude et la paix !

Il est si doux, si beau de s'être fait soi-même ;  
De devoir tout à soi, tout aux beaux arts qu'on aime ;  
Vraie abeille en ses dons, en ses soins, en ses mœurs,  
D'avoir su se bâtir, des dépouilles des fleurs,  
Sa cellule de cire, industrieux asile  
Où l'on coule une vie innocente et facile.

There are several elegies in this strain, and they are more attractive, I think, than the love elegies, which, whether they are confessions or literary affectations, do not appear to me of any great interest.

Passing over the Epistles, which are not particularly remarkable, we come to the Miscellaneous

Poems, the first of which is the critical essay called *L'Invention*. Conscious, perhaps, of his tendency to feel the influence of the classical poets all too much, he has made this study of his art take the form of an assertion of freedom. The poet is to be free to choose his own subject and to treat it in his own way:—

Ce n'est qu'aux inventeurs que la vie est promise ;

and he gives in passing an admirable definition of what invention is: it is, as he says, when the poet

Montre et fait adopter à la nature mère  
Ce qu'elle n'a point fait mais ce qu'elle a pu faire.

He wishes, with more questionable judgment, that the modern poet should seize on the results of modern science as matter for his art—

En langage de dieux fasse parler Newton ;—

and on this subject he enlarges at considerable length. The poem is certainly readable enough and vigorous enough throughout, but it can hardly be pronounced a great success. He has no grand ideal of his art to announce, and he has not the wit and *verve* and epigrammatic power with which Boileau atoned for the same want.

This is followed by the fragments of his great poem *Hermes*, by which he aspired to be the Lucretius of his age. This was to have been composed of three cantos on the origin of the world, of human society, and of political organisations. Eighteen fragments of it remain to show that Chénier did not possess the philosophic grasp necessary for the production of another *De Rerum Naturâ*. The poem

shows him a child of his century, not merely in its generous optimism and ardour for justice and reform, but also in its delightful but dangerous amateurishness. Voltaire, the typical man of the century, was at all times perfectly ready to write a book on any subject at ten minutes' notice; and he has so much to say on things in general, and says it so brilliantly, that we really hardly notice that on the particular subject promised he says nothing at all. The only difference between him and his contemporaries who are forgotten is that he is an amateur of genius and they are amateurs without genius. If they have not his infinite cleverness, they have his spirit to the full; and we see them advancing from all sides, a numerous but very light-armed host, perfectly confident in their ability to reconstitute society with the assistance of a few general ideas. There are advantages, no doubt, in this system as compared with that of the German, who is supposed to begin his argument for the particular use of a particle with a consideration of language as it was, or may have been, in the Garden of Eden; but still the light-hearted amateur is a dangerous, if an amusing, person, especially in politics. And few things show this spirit of amateurishness more than the *Hermes* of Chénier, which discusses the origin of things and their destination with vigour, rhetorical power, enthusiasm — all that you will except information. And the poet has not the art any more than the science necessary for the high flight he had proposed to himself. His imagination is not of the Miltonic order, ranging at ease through the vast spaces of primæval chaos and the problems of human destiny :



he is one of those lesser spirits whose work lies not with the mystery of the things we do not know, but with the beauty of the things we know. And so even here in this ambitious poem, where the aim was so high, it is not in the high things that he has attained his mark, but in such an incidental episode as the picture of Orpheus and the Argonauts, which occurs in the 17th Fragment. And in the same way the *Susanne*, which was intended to follow Milton, and deal with a later Hebrew story as he had dealt with the opening chapters of Genesis, fails altogether to attain to Milton's grand style, and contains nothing remarkable except the panegyric upon the great English poet, in which he asks the Spirit of Harmony to grant him

Un peu de ces discours grands, profonds comme toi,  
Paroles de délice ou paroles d'effroi  
Aux lèvres de Milton incessamment écloses,  
Grand aveugle dont l'âme a su voir tant de choses !

There is nothing else worthy of special note in the volume, except the Odes and Iambes, which close it. One of the earlier odes is Chénier's most perfect utterance of love, as it seems to me. For once he is not writing an exercise ; he is speaking from his heart. But his passion is not too strong for artistic expression. Here it is :—

J'ai vu sur d'autres yeux, qu'Amour faisait sourire,  
Ses doux regards s'attendrir et pleurer,  
Et du miel le plus doux que sa bouche respire  
Une autre bouche s'enivrer.

Et quand sur mon visage, inquiet, tourmenté,  
Une sueur involontaire  
Exprimait le dépit de mon cœur agité,  
Un coup-d'œil caressant, furtivement jeté,  
Tempérait dans mon sein cette souffrance amère.

Ah ! dans le fond de ses forêts,  
 Le ramier, déchiré de traits,  
 Gémit au moins sans se contraindre ;  
 Et le fugitif Actéon  
 Percé par les traits d'Orion,  
 Peut l'accuser, et peut se plaindre.

Half the secret of charm in art lies in the self-restraint which suggests but does not say. Low relief is nearly always more beautiful than high, for just that reason ; and here in the same way another verse would have spoilt all.

Besides this perfect little piece there is the well-known ode to Versailles, conceived with all the gentle melancholy of Gray or Collins, but hardly showing either the felicity of phrase of the one or the richness of atmosphere of the other. The rest, both Odes and Iambes, are political—tremendous indictments of the men who were deluging France with blood, while they for ever had liberty and justice on their lips. There is the famous ode to Charlotte Corday ; there is a denunciation of the *fête* of the 14th of July ; and another in which he draws an indignant contrast between the security of life at Constantinople and at Paris. This last was written in prison at Saint-Lazare, as were the attack on his brother whom he wrongly fancied to be neglecting him, the famous *Jeune Captive*, and most of the Iambes. Well-known as it is — better known, I suppose, than anything of Chénier's—I cannot resist quoting a few stanzas of *La Jeune Captive*. The subject of the ode was Mademoiselle de Coigny, afterwards Duchesse de Fleury, who was Chénier's fellow-prisoner at Saint-Lazare :—

L'épi naissant mûrit de la faux respecté ;  
Sans crainte du pressoir, le pampre tout l'été  
Boit les doux présents de l'aurore ;  
Et moi, comme lui belle, et jeune comme lui,  
Quoi que l'heure présente ait de trouble et d'ennui,  
Je ne veux point mourir encore.

Mon beau voyage encore est si loin de sa fin !  
Je pars, et des ormeaux qui bordent le chemin  
J'ai passé les premiers à peine.  
Au banquet de la vie à peine commencé,  
Un instant seulement mes lèvres ont pressé  
La coupe en mes mains encore pleine.

Je ne suis qu'au printemps, je veux voir la moisson ;  
Et comme le soleil, de saison en saison,  
Je veux achever mon année.  
Brillante sur ma tige et l'honneur du jardin,  
Je n'ai vu fuir encore que les feux du matin,  
Je veux achever ma journée.

O mort ! tu peux attendre ; éloigne, éloigne-toi ;  
Va consoler les cœurs que la honte, l'effroi,  
Le pâle désespoir dévore.  
Pour moi Palès encore a des asiles verts,  
Les amours des baisers, les Muses des concerts ;  
Je ne veux point mourir encore !

This is one of the cases in which criticism has only to register a popular verdict of universal admiration. The instinctive revolt of youth against death has never, I suppose, found more beautiful expression. After all, Chénier was only thirty-one himself; and if any one asks how it is that he has given the young duchess's complaint with such rare power and pathos, the answer is by no means far to seek: he had only to look within to learn his lesson.

I have already said something of the Iambes with which the volume ends. In them certainly, if ever

anywhere, *facit indignatio versum*: there it is, seething and struggling in every line—the patriot's outraged sense of justice, the poet's anger, so fierce just because it is so impotent, at the monstrous tyranny which was every day dooming genius and innocence as he knew in his own case, high birth and beauty, and personal charm, as he saw in those around him, to a death as ignominious as it was undeserved. These at least should be read, if nothing else of Chénier's be read; for, even if they were not splendid poems, they would still be historical documents of the first importance. Not that he tells us much in them that we do not otherwise know. The historical value of the Iambes consists not in adding yet a few more to the multitude of dry bones which already cover the field of the Revolution, but in making the dry bones live. In Chénier's Iambes the victims of the Terror find their most eloquent voice, an imperishable voice, not to be silenced: the light which they flash with such scorching intensity on the dark places of the Revolution lasts, it is true, only for a moment; but when it is withdrawn, the scene it revealed is left burnt in the memory for ever.

Nine of them, some of which are unfinished, are published in the ordinary editions. They are all alike in tone, but in artistic finish and force of imagination the first and the last three are, I think, finer than the intermediate ones. Perhaps the culminating point of tragic pity and fear is attained in the eighth, with the terrible simile, worked out ruthlessly in all its horror, of the sheep carried off to the slaughter. I will quote it in full:—

that we become conscious of his splendid dramatic gift. What he could have made of the play of various characters we have no means of knowing ; but few men have possessed more than he of one of the gifts which are the special need of the playwright, the capacity for making the situation felt. No one puts down the Iambes without feeling that he has himself been at Saint-Lazare. He knows those long corridors where high-born men and beautiful women are quarrelling and trifling to their last hour, and where a young poet walks alone sharpening the arrows of his verse against the tyrants : he has been in them and seen them ; and he knows them as we know the heath on which Lear passed the most awful night known to literature, and the palace front where Cassandra shrieked her last prophecies and passed shuddering to her fate.

Chénier is not one of the world's supreme poets ; perhaps if he had lived he might have been ; but, as things are, he has left enough work in the Iambes, in the best of the Odes, in his beautiful transcriptions of Greek myth and story, to prove his poetic gift to have been real, and to justify his claim to be remembered and to be read. In the roll of French poets it is only the very greatest names that can be placed above his ; and for Englishmen it is easier to feel his attraction than that of some greater men. He has something too much of the rhetorician in him, of course ; but if rhetoric be made a deadly sin, how few among his countrymen will be able to stand ? And he has something else in him which enables us to forget his rhetoric,—something which

to the Northern mind has always been of the very essence of poetry ; that quality which made Sainte-Beuve say of him, that he was the first great 'poète personnel et rêveur' in France since La Fontaine. It is real in him, and there are indications of it everywhere : perhaps, indeed, we may be excused for thinking that it is only his faithfulness to the Alexandrine which limited the freedom and variety of his dreams. But, be that as it may, he has the temper, and it helps us to appreciate him. With that, and an almost modern love of nature, and an eloquence which in his best pieces has too much soul in it to be confused with rhetoric ; with a political fervour which makes us think of Shelley, and an artistic insight into the beauty of Greek mythology which is a foretaste of Keats,—he is a poet for whom a high place ought always to be unhesitatingly assured ; and that, too, as a matter of right, the just payment for work accomplished, and not as a mere tribute of sympathy offered to his brilliant promise and untimely fate.

VICTOR HUGO

## VICTOR HUGO<sup>1</sup>

NOTHING, not even genius, quite escapes the influence of its own age and nation. Stranger and alien as Chénier must sometimes have felt himself in that era of enlightened prose, he is still of it, still in some degree a man of the eighteenth century. The very conception of such a poem as the *Hermes* belongs entirely to the age of the philosophers: and the serene elegance and sanity which mark nearly all his work were swept away, for at least half a century, by the storm of the Revolution. By his fine sense of beauty, by his metrical innovations, by his noble enthusiasms, by the sincerity and strength of which he gave such signal proof in the ultimate ordeal of the Terror, he could point the way to the promised land. But he could not enter it. He died, not indeed in the wilderness, but at least in the passage of the Jordan. The man who was to be the voice of the new age that rose from the ruins of the Revolution only entered the world eight years after Chénier's head had fallen on the scaffold.

Perhaps no name in French literature stands for so much as that of Victor Hugo. He had a long

<sup>1</sup> The edition to which references are made in the notes is the smaller *Œuvres Complètes* published by Hetzel and the Maison Quantin.



life and a large personality. Born less than ten years after the Terror, he lived fourteen years after the Commune. A Royalist in his youth, both by inheritance and by temperament, he lived to be the voice, almost the incarnation, of the spirit of democracy. He knew the taste of exile, the bitterest cup of all that must be drained by the defeated politician, and he survived it to know in turn that of popular adulation, the most intoxicating and the most dangerous. He began life as a literary rebel, and died an accepted classic.

All these things, and the fact that he touched life so long and from so many sides, make him an embarrassingly large subject to attempt to treat in an essay. Yet no one writing on French poetry, whatever else he may be obliged to leave untouched, can dare to turn away from the most splendid figure of all. And perhaps the time has begun to come, now that he has been more than twenty years in the grave to which he was carried with such ostentatious simplicity, when we may try to set our hands to the work of posterity, and begin to strip him of what was ephemeral and unessential, and look only at the vital and immortal part by which he has his place among the undying glories of France. And this simplification of the problem of Hugo is at once an easier and a more necessary task in the case of us who are not Frenchmen. Neither the political nor the literary quarrels of the French matter very greatly to us. We at least shall not go to French poets for instruction in our political duty. And the other point is still more important. Half the pages that Frenchmen have

written about Victor Hugo are not unnaturally given to the breach he made in the fortress of the French classical tradition. But a foreigner, unless he writes for specialists, ought to aim at a wider point of view. The most daring *enjambement* in the world, the most startlingly placed *césure*, even though they once robbed academicians of their sleep, will not interest posterity, and need not detain us. The fame of Sophocles and Euripides does not now depend on the innovations they made in the theatre of Athens. Schoolmasters and even scholars may occupy themselves with such matters: but for those who read the Greek tragedies as great poetry, it is other matters altogether that fill the mind. They are studying things of a very different order of importance to any questions of the technical development of the Attic stage. And so, if Hugo is to be read permanently by those who are not Frenchmen, his claims must be based on something altogether wider than any such achievements as the liberation of the Alexandrine verse from its ancient trammels, or the enrichment of the store of French rhymes. Foreigners will never be perfectly competent to judge with authority in these purely national questions, and they have the right as well as the duty of setting them aside. For, however interesting the answer to them may be, it is no answer to the question which is the only one urgently asked by the foreign lover of poetry: what is Victor Hugo's contribution to the poetic utterance of the heart and mind of the world?

Few poets have ever been so prodigal of verse as

Hugo. The *Édition Définitive* of his works includes twenty-five volumes of poetry, over and above his plays. It will be a large enough task for us here if, putting aside the prose works and the dramas, we try to arrive at some notion of what it is in those many volumes of verse that has the final seal of greatness on it. The mere reading of so much is no light business. And of course the poet pays the penalty of this prodigious volubility. There is nothing which his amazing facility cannot turn into verse. His energy is inexhaustible. Never once, perhaps, in all the twenty-five volumes does he exhibit a trace of weariness. He often irritates by his violence, by his verbose declamation, by his lack of humour, by his colossal and immeasurable vanity : but by the flat dulness, born of those moments, which so few artists escape, when they have lost faith in themselves and delight in their work, never once, I think, in all his life. 'French of the French,' as Tennyson called him, he has a great deal in him that is very uncongenial to Englishmen. We have all been Puritans, either in our own persons or those of our ancestors, and Hugo's lack of seriousness in the presence of the most serious things is profoundly distasteful to us. He is a sincere and passionate enemy of materialism and, in his own way, a sincere and passionate believer in God. But of the fear of God, of the awe and the sense of human littleness and sinfulness which we generally associate with those to whom belief in God has meant most, there is not in Hugo a single trace. The word 'Dieu' is everywhere in his poems, but every recurrence of it makes us more sure that, if it had meant more to

him, it would have been less often on his page. Again and again it seems to be brought in only as a kind of rhetorical flourish to clench his argument, or silence his orthodox enemies. And even this rhetorical use of the holiest names is less distasteful to most people with English traditions than the familiar and free and easy use of them, which is also common with Hugo. Such a passage as this from the *Chansons des Rues et des Bois* shows that in France the blood of Voltaire runs a little even in the most unlikely veins. It is written during an illness with the possibility of death before him :

Mon âme se change en prune :  
Ma raison sonde Dieu voilé ;  
Je tâte la porte éternelle,  
Et j'essaie à la nuit ma clé.

C'est Dieu que le fossoyeur creuse :  
Mourir c'est l'heure de savoir ;  
Je dis à la mort : Vieille ouvreuse,  
Je viens voir le spectacle noir.<sup>1</sup>

What is an *ouvreuse*? An old woman who shows you to your seat at a French theatre. Well, to be able to speak in that way, at that moment, of God and death is not a strength at all in our eyes: it is a weakness. And it is not merely a question of character or seriousness. It is a question of art. There is no principle of art more fundamental than that great words, except in deliberate comedy, ought only to be greatly used. It is one of which Victor Hugo knew nothing, as may be seen by such a passage as this as well as by his frequent use<sup>2</sup> of the

<sup>1</sup> *Chansons des Rues et des Bois*, 261.

<sup>2</sup> See, for an instance, *Chansons des Rues et des Bois*, 212, 213.

simile which degrades, which lowers the vitality of the subject he wishes to illustrate instead of heightening it.

And he is 'French of the French' also in a more natural and pardonable way. But still it is a way that is a drawback for us. We cannot be expected to think of France as the one nation that has really counted in the world since Greece and Rome, nor of Paris as occupying in the map of Europe the place of the sun in the solar system. Still less can we see in the universal brigandage of Napoleon a generous gift for which the peoples of Europe are for ever to love the generosity of the people of France. And not all the passionate eloquence of *L'Année Terrible* will make the best lover of France amongst us feel that there was any new, unheard of, uniquely abominable, wickedness in the victorious Germans doing in 1871 what the French had done often before and would most assuredly have been doing then if they had been the victors and not the vanquished. *Amica Francia; magis amica,—non Germania sed—veritas.* French spectacles are pretty wear for a Frenchman, perhaps, but they sit uncomfortably on English noses, and the verses which cannot be read without them will never be read very willingly here.

One other word and the task of clearing the ground will be done. Matthew Arnold used to complain of French worship of the goddess Aselgeia; and many English people, because they are hypocrites, as Frenchmen often think, or, as is nearer the truth, because that goddess does not appear to them either a beautiful or an edifying object of worship, do not care for books in which they are likely to

meet with her praises. Well, let it be said at once for those who know little of Hugo, that this fear need not frighten them. In all his thousands of poems there are few indeed that could not be placed in the hands of a girl of sixteen. It is not the least of Hugo's praises that, in an age and country where the most unlikely writers set decency at defiance, he kept the pages of its greatest poet pure.

And now to get back to our question: what is Hugo's contribution to the poetic utterance of the heart and mind of the world? What is the English reader, bewildered by the prospect of the twenty-five volumes, to look for in particular? Why should he go to Hugo and what will he find? Such questions might meet with many different answers: specialists in language, students of metre, students of the French character, and so on, might all give one of their own: but the answer I am trying to get at here is that of no specialist at all, but of the plain lover of literature and especially of poetry, of those who find in poetry at once the most delightful of human arts, and the least imperfect utterance man has achieved of what he has in him at his greatest moments.

Well, man is never greater, we shall all agree, than when the whole world shines for his eyes in a sunlight of love. And songs of love which are among the very oldest of man's makings are still to-day among the most delightful. And who has given us more exquisite songs than Victor Hugo? Let him answer for himself, with the two wonderful songs from the *Chants du Crépuscule*:

S'il est un charmant gazon  
 Que le ciel arrose,  
 Où brille en toute saison  
 Quelque fleur éclore,  
 Où l'on cueille à pleine main  
 Lys, chèvrefeuille et jasmin,  
 J'en veux faire le chemin  
 Où ton pied se pose !

S'il est un sein bien aimant  
 Dont l'honneur dispose,  
 Dont le ferme dévouement  
 N'aît rien de morose,  
 Si toujours ce noble sein  
 Bat pour un digne dessein  
 J'en veux faire le coussin  
 Où ton front se pose !

S'il est un rêve d'amour  
 Parfumé de rose,  
 Où l'on trouve chaque jour  
 Quelque douce chose,  
 Un rêve que Dieu bénit,  
 Où l'âme à l'âme s'unit,  
 Oh ! j'en veux faire le nid  
 Où ton cœur se pose !

How it sings, every word of it, sets itself to music, and dances to its own tune ! There are deeper songs in the world of poetry, songs whose time is beaten for them by the droppings of human tears, and some of them come from Victor Hugo : but where shall we find one in which the delightfulness of love's assurance gets more gracious utterance ? Unless indeed it be this which follows it :

L'aube naît et ta porte est close.  
 Ma belle, pourquoi sommeiller ?  
 A l'heure où s'éveille la rose  
 Ne vas-tu pas te réveiller ?

O ma charmante,  
 Écoute ici  
 L'amant qui chante  
 Et pleure aussi !

Tout frappe à ta porte bénie.  
L'aurore dit : je suis le jour !  
L'oiseau dit : je suis l'harmonie !  
Et mon cœur dit : je suis l'amour !

O ma charmante  
Écoute ici  
L'amant qui chante  
Et pleure aussi !

Je t'adore ange et t'aime femme.  
Dieu qui par toi m'a complété  
A fait mon amour pour ton âme  
Et mon regard pour ta beauté.

O ma charmante,  
Écoute ici  
L'amant qui chante  
Et pleure aussi !

Is not the poise and balance of that refrain, as it seems to hang in the air, lingering to enjoy its own delightfulness, one of the greatest triumphs which the art of making music out of human speech has ever achieved? As for the thought in either of the songs, it is of course simple and obvious enough. And indeed those who search for the untrodden ways of the human intellect must not walk with Hugo. Strangeness of word or phrase, and especially of names and places, and strangeness of fancy, especially in the days of *Les Orientales*, they will find in him in abundance: but strangeness of thought seldom or never. He walks in the great highway of human thought and feeling, and rarely quits it. But as Wordsworth, himself the discoverer of a new world of poetry, once said: 'New thoughts, however deep, are not the staple of poetry, but old thoughts, presented with immortal freshness, and a kind of inspired felicity of diction.' And, in any case, wherever else adventurous ingenuity of thought may be wanted, it is not here in such songs



as these. All curious thinking would be out of harmony with the primal simplicity of these divine moments: when they are upon us we do not ask to think, but to unite our voices to the psalm of joy which then seems to us to be the world's universal song. We rejoice in the gladness of the world, and all living things rejoice in ours, so that, as he says in another poem, birds and butterflies are full of our happiness.

L'oiseau, que les hivers désolent,  
Le frais papillon rajeuni,  
Toutes les choses qui s'envolent,  
En murmurent dans l'infini.<sup>1</sup>

That is a poet's fancy, perhaps: but there is no true poet in whom fancy is not close akin to faith. And Hugo never wavered in his faith that love was the greatest thing in all the world, the key to all mysteries, the cure of all ills, a king whose greatest conquests were yet before him, a discoverer who, if we would but let him set sail, had a whole new world to find for us. The dream of a mysterious unity lying behind the varied manifestations which the eye sees and the hand handles, the dream to which the brooding spirit of Virgil first gave poetic utterance, and of which our own Wordsworth was the inspired prophet, was also for Hugo, in his vaguer way, an inextinguishable faith. It is not merely the exhilaration of a great artist in splendid verse that rings through such things as his *Mugit-us-que Bœum*:<sup>2</sup> it is the ecstasy of those who see further and deeper and higher than the rest of us, those who are the prophet eyes of humanity seeing

<sup>1</sup> *Chansons*, 179.

<sup>2</sup> *Contemplations*, ii. 96.

for us what we cannot see for ourselves. He stands listening as the darkness comes on, and what he seems to hear is such voices as these :

Vivez ! croissez ! semez le grain à l'aventure !  
Qu'on sente frissonner dans toute la nature,  
Sous la feuille des nids, au seuil blanc des maisons,  
Dans l'obscur tremblement des profonds horizons,  
Un vaste emportement d'aimer, dans l'herbe verte,  
Dans l'autre, dans l'étang, dans la clairière ouverte,  
D'aimer sans fin, d'aimer toujours, d'aimer encor,  
Sous la sérénité des sombres astres d'or !  
Faites tressaillir l'air, le flot, l'aile, la bouche,  
O palpitations du grand amour farouche !  
Qu'on sente le baiser de l'être illimité !  
Et paix, vertu, bonheur, espérance, bonté,  
O fruits divins, tombez des branches éternelles !

Ainsi vous parliez, voix, grandes voix solennelles :  
Et Virgile écoutait comme j'écoute, et l'eau  
Voyait passer le cygne auguste, et le bouleau,  
Le vent, et le rocher, l'écume, et le ciel sombre.  
L'homme. . . — O nature ! abîme ! immensité de l'ombre !

It is the business of the poet to give new life to life itself. If he has the right voice and we are the right hearers, all that we do and feel takes an added, heightened, glorified vitality while we listen. And not only does the old become new, and the ordinary extraordinary, but the non-existent finds existence, and all that was not is. All that we felt vaguely and half unconsciously, we now feel with ecstatic clearness: all that we did not feel finds strange and sudden birth in us, all that we did not see bursts in magical freshness upon our opened and astonished eyes. That is an ideal, only accomplished in perfection when the poet is at his very highest moment of speech, and we at our fittest of hearing. But is there not more than a

partial realisation of it in such things as I have quoted? Will any but the dullest fail to feel some dance of love in him as he listens to those songs: will any but the blindest fail to see some of the magic that unites old and new, memory and discovery, together in what the poet saw as he watched

Dans l'obscur tremblement des profonds horizons?

And will any that have ever learnt to make poetic ventures fail to go their part of the way with him as he draws the great conclusion in which he scarcely wavered even in his saddest hours?—

O splendeur ! o douceur ! l'étendue infinie  
Est un balancement d'amour et d'harmonie.

Contempons à genoux.

Une voix sort du ciel et dans nos fibres passe ;  
De là nos chants profonds : le rythme est dans l'espace,  
Et la lyre est en nous.<sup>1</sup>

There is a sentiment here which is rather French than English: but what an ardour of ecstasy shines through it! We may miss, perhaps, the Tennysonian gruffness of conviction that, if there were not Love behind Nature, life would be intolerable and suicide the only solution: but if Hugo will not be quite sure that life has no good things in it even without a key to its mysteries, he is most abundantly sure that it gains a thousandfold on every side when that key is in the hand. And, for poets and those who believe in poetry, that is a long way towards conviction of its truth. For, in the fine phrase of Maeterlinck, 'le moment où l'objet nous paraît le plus admirable est celui où nous avons le plus de chance d'apercevoir sa vérité.'

<sup>1</sup> *Toute la Lyre*, i. 155.

But, whatever the philosophic truth of these high dreamings may be, the poetic point is that we have them, all of us, or all of us who are likely to touch poetry. And therefore to express them with the power and beauty, and moving ecstasy, of Victor Hugo is precisely, in the words of our own definition, to vivify life itself, and to make a real contribution to the poetic utterance of the heart and mind of the world.

In fact Victor Hugo's great claim lies just there: that he is a kind of spokesman of humanity, and in particular that he more than any one else is the poetic voice of the whole nineteenth century. It is the characteristic of the great Epic poets that they have gathered up the whole of their age into a single poem. All the various activities of the earliest Greek civilisation find their place in Homer: the whole of Virgil's age, the dying Republic, the young Empire, the new instinct of universal humanity, the sympathies and yearnings that were making the way straight for the march of Christianity, all are in the twelve books of the *Æneid*: and in the *Divina Commedia* there is scarcely any virtue or vice, any art or activity, any religious dream or political aspiration of the Middle Age on which Dante does not somewhere throw the awful light of Heaven and Hell. Victor Hugo wrote no Epic Poem. But he came nearer to doing the work of the great Epic poets than any one else in his day. And that in two ways. He gave us in his vast and wonderful novel *Les Misérables* what is more like a great Epic than any other single work printed in the nineteenth century. And in a different way he achieved some-

thing of the same universal and representative kind by the amazing variety of his poetical productions. He is perhaps the most universal poet the world has known since Shakspeare. Many poets have utterly surpassed him in particular fields: none, I think, has touched so many and failed nowhere. Most of the rest, if we may say it with due reverence, have such obvious limitations. Milton does not care for love, nor Goethe for politics: Leopardi, for all his grave beauty, has hardly more than a single note, that of despair; Wordsworth knows man only, as it were, in his elemental moments, Byron knows him only, or chiefly, in his worst: Shelley, unique master of the world of spirit, sees clouds in place of solid earth and ideal abstractions instead of men and women. Tennyson seemed at times hardly to know that poetry was a thing of passion, or Browning that it was a mystery brooding over a mystery, or Arnold that it was a trumpet song of faith and power. And in Hugo's own country no fallen angel like De Musset, no Eastern dreamer like Leconte de Lisle, no painter of gorgeous pictures, as motionless as they are beautiful, like Heredia, can compare with him as the spokesman of a varied century. No doubt that does not prove that Hugo is greater than these men. Indeed Milton unquestionably, and Goethe and Wordsworth, in spite of their limitations, almost certainly, are greater men than he. It is not the bulk but the quality of a poet's work that gives him his final rank: and no one can yet say whether one or other, named or unnamed, of the rest who covered so much less ground than Hugo, but covered it so much

more completely, may not have grown flowers that will ultimately outlive the vast product of Hugo's multitudinous energies. But that is not the point. The claim that Hugo is the most universal poet since Shakspeare is not a claim that he is greater than any other, but that he touches life on more sides, and has more varied poetic gifts. He has, in a greater or less degree, the special gift of each: and then he has so many other things beside. To make the comparison, for instance, with two only of the long line, Milton and Tennyson. The two great gifts of Milton were his assured possession of the most unfailingly majestic utterance that has come from the lips of men since the fall of the ancient world, and the soaring sublimity of an imagination that ranged at ease from Heaven to Hell. Well, of course Hugo is not in the same world with Milton as a master of godlike speech: but then who is? And if Hugo is not an artist in language after the order of Milton, he is still the greatest his race has produced. If Milton could touch nothing without leaving on it a stamp of greatness, Hugo, who touched everything, never once perhaps failed to call forth some music of verse, even out of the silence of the darkest and dearest things. And if he cannot rise to Heaven on such wings as those of Milton's 'sphere-born harmonious sisters,' his *Vision de Dante*, even if it stood alone, is enough to show that hardly Dante or Milton can go deeper into Hell. He takes, then, his humbler place in Milton's own glorious world. But what of the worlds Milton never entered? The landscapes of Milton are among the noblest in poetry: but where in them

all is that sense of the mystery of Nature, of the voice that knows the secret and can whisper it through the silence but can never tell it plain, which Hugo gives us again and again with such sympathy of imagination, with such murmuring beauty of verse? Where indeed are any of the things that poetry could not learn till Christianity, or at least till Virgil, came to reveal them? The mystery that hangs over human life, the *lacrime rerum*, is as alien to Milton's page as the mystery that hangs over the dying or the dawning light. And each alike is woven into the very stuff of Hugo. Where again in Milton is Hugo's wondering delight in the innocence and beauty, the joy and mystery—for it is mystery once more—that poetry can never again fail to see in the face of a child? Where is the tender universal sympathy, not with heroes alone or saints, but with the weak, the obscure, the poor, with the whole of our failing and suffering humanity? Where is Milton's drama? He wrote, indeed, in the form of drama, a poem incomparably greater than any play of Hugo's, but it has almost all great qualities in it except the dramatic, and it is not, nor ever was meant to be, a work for the stage. In *Gastibelsa* Hugo created one of the most magical ballads in the world: where in Milton is, not its equal, but any fragment or fraction of its equal? Where, above all, are Milton's lyrics of love, and where are they not in Hugo!

Puisqu'ici-bas toute âme  
 Donne à quelqu'un  
 Sa musique, sa flamme,  
 Ou son parfum ;

Puisqu' avril donne aux chênes  
Un bruit charmant ;  
Que la nuit donne aux peines  
L'oubli dormant ;

Puisque lorsqu'elle arrive  
S'y reposer,  
L'onde amère à la rive  
Donne un baiser ;

Je te donne, à cette heure,  
Penché sur toi,  
La chose la meilleure  
Que j'aie en moi !

. . . . .  
Reçois mes vœux sans nombre,  
O mes amours !  
Reçois la flamme ou l'ombre  
De tous mes jours !

. . . . .  
Ma muse, que les heures  
Bercent rêvant,  
Qui, pleurant quand tu pleures,  
Pleure souvent !

Reçois, mon bien céleste,  
O ma beauté,  
Mon cœur, dont rien ne reste  
L'amour ôté !<sup>1</sup>

How wide a world away such stanzas as these are, with their exquisite grace of fancy and movement and form, from anything Milton has left us ! Well, it is the measure of Hugo's universality that such a poem as this, with the very spirit of love and airy lightness in it, is by the same author as the *Vision de Dante*, as the great ode on Napoleon in *Les Feuilles d'Automne*, as the tremendous series of the *Légende des Siècles*, as the solemn and beautiful elegies with which the death of his daughter filled the second volume of *Les Contemplations*.

<sup>1</sup> *Voix Intérieures*, 101.



To press the comparison further would be tedious. As it is, an Englishman with a tithe of the reverence he ought to feel in the presence of Milton must have a guilty sense, after drawing such a parallel, of having laid rude hands on his father Parmenides. But Milton's greatness is of an order so high and splendid that he of all men suffers least from the acknowledgment that it is not universal.

It would of course be still easier to demonstrate the same thing in the case of Tennyson. Hugo is a journalist by his side in such a matter as the *curiosa felicitas* in which Tennyson came near to rivalling Horace. He had neither the patience nor the artistic conscience, nor the stern self-restraint which goes to building up such things as *Ulysses* or *The Lotos-Eaters*, or the lyrics in *Maud* and *The Princess* or the lines to Virgil. He is fond of talking of Horace, but never two poets were less alike. The Horatian felicity will not be married to such facility as that of Hugo. And in all that order of things, as well as in manliness and a kind of greatness of soul, Tennyson leaves him far behind. But where in Tennyson is Hugo's inexhaustible abundance of poetic speech and fancy, where except once or twice in *Maud* and some early lyrics is Hugo's airy grace and lightness as of a leaf dancing in the air or a boat on the waves, where in his Olympian wisdom is Hugo's passionate outpouring of love and sympathy, when shall we connect children, or the sea, or the suffering and surging heart of the people, with Tennyson as they are for ever inseparably connected with Hugo? Where does Tennyson give us the sense, as Hugo does so often, of a torrent in flood sweeping all

barriers before it, and compelling all who find themselves there to follow in its triumphant flow?

It is unnecessary to pursue the comparison. Milton is one of the acknowledged giants of poetry. Tennyson is, perhaps, the only poet among the contemporaries of Hugo's manhood who rivalled him in immediate and visible popularity. If the French poet can in this particular point more than hold his own against such men as these two, there can be no doubt that he has an exceptionally wide range of interest. The object of the remainder of this essay will be to try to illustrate this in some detail, and for that purpose I shall not hesitate to quote freely. For that I make no apology. Few people possessing any large acquaintance with critical studies will deny that in the long run the critic who will not quote is a mere beater of the air. People will not look up references; and yet the work of bringing out the essential qualities of a poet can no more be done in the case of a poet without his verses than it can in the case of an artist without his pictures. Quotation, and liberal quotation, is therefore a necessity as well as a pleasure. And the necessity can seldom be greater than it is with a poet who covers so much ground as Hugo.

We have already seen something of his work in one particular field, that of the love lyric. Let us now look at something quite different. Let us see his imagination working, as it were, in repose. What an amazing painter of pictures he is, pictures of all sorts, portraits, groups, but above all, landscapes! He sees everything when he chooses as a painter sees it. His almost unique eye for form gives him an

astonishing mastery of outline and colour, and fills him with an unrivalled storehouse of metaphors and similes. But he is never a realist: the imagination is always at work as well as the eye: the bare fact he knows to belong to the man of science, not to the poet: and he gives it to us not bare and naked but richly clothed, new coloured, new formed, new created, heightened to glory or darkened to gloom, touched and transformed to fit the imaginative purpose he has in hand. So that even when he is giving us such 'choses vues' as the studies of clouds in *Toute la Lyre*<sup>1</sup> there is a suggestion if nothing else of more than the eye can see. Here is one passage where we get the strange lights which sometimes accompany a thundercloud, passing in and out of the blackness:

Comme si, sous le souffle de Dieu,  
De grands poissons de flamme aux écailles de feu,  
Vastes formes dans l'ombre au hasard remuées,  
En ce sombre océan de brume et de nuées  
Nageaient, et dans les flots du lourd nuage noir  
Se laissaient par instants vaguement entrevoir.

There is the simple picture, seen and painted, with little more than metaphor and suggestion to heighten it. We will not stay to discuss its beauty, but go on to another still more beautiful, where we feel as well as see. What have not poets done to show us the wonder of the night which we care so little to go out to see? And who has done more than Hugo in his lovely *Nuits de Juin*?

L'été, lorsque le jour a fui, de fleurs couverte  
La plaine verse au loin un parfum enivrant :  
Les yeux fermés, l'oreille aux rumeurs entr'ouverte,  
On ne dort qu'à demi d'un sommeil transparent.

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<sup>1</sup> *Lyre*, i. 93.

Les astres sont plus purs, l'ombre paraît meilleure ;  
 Un vague demi-jour teint le dôme éternel :  
 Et l'aube douce et pâle, en attendant son heure,  
 Semble toute la nuit errer au bas du ciel.<sup>1</sup>

Can one ever be out on a summer night again with out recalling that last wonderful line? The little poem is a landscape by Corot: and this, with its more definite outline, and its tender sympathy not now with the poetic dreamer, but with the man who works and believes, will bring up at once the thought of François Millet. It is the sower, using the last hour of daylight :

Sa haute silhouette noire  
 Domine les profonds labours.  
 On sent à quel point il doit croire  
 A la fuite utile des jours.

Il marche dans la plaine immense,  
 Va, vient, lance la graine au loin,  
 Rouvre sa main, et recommence,  
 Et je médite, obscur témoin,

Pendant que, déployant ses voiles,  
 L'ombre, où se mêle une rumeur,  
 Semble élargir jusqu'aux étoiles  
 Le geste auguste du semeur.<sup>2</sup>

How the poet has seen it, not with the eye only, that *geste auguste du semeur*! He abounds in single lines which call up a whole picture, too often overwhelmed in the complete poem by his profuse exuberance! What a tremendous effect, for instance, is produced, in the great picture of the sea slowly and calmly rising over the doomed primeval city, by that wonderful line,

Comme un grave ouvrier qui sait qu'il a le temps ;<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *Rayons*, 257.

<sup>2</sup> *Chansons*, 207.

<sup>3</sup> *Légende*, i. 98.

what a Shakspearian touch it is! One draws one's breath with awe to watch for the end. The poem itself, 'La Ville Disparue,' is a fine thing, one of many which show with what majestic ease the imagination of Hugo moved among the remote beginnings of the world. Of the same kind is the great 'Feu du Ciel' of *Les Orientales*, a thing of amazing force and fiery energy. The cloud of sulphur, on its errand of doom, passes over the sea, and the happy cities of the sea, and over Egypt, and over the desert, and over the towers of Babel, and at each it asks if its task lies there, and at each is told to go further, till at last it reaches the two cities of the plain. There they lie in their monstrous splendour :

dormant dans la brume des nuits,  
Avec leurs dieux, leur peuple, et leurs chars, et leurs bruits.

We see all their barbaric glory as the cloud is poised above them :

Des jardins suspendus, pleins de fleurs et d'arcades  
Et d'arbres noirs penchés sur de vastes cascades ;  
Des plafonds d'un seul bloc couvrant de vastes salles,  
Où, sans jamais lever leurs têtes colossales,  
Veillaient, assis en cercle, et se regardant tous,  
Des dieux d'airain, posant leurs mains sur leurs genoux.

There they were, a stain on the earth, with their hideous gods and monstrous vices : and yet,

Tout dormait cependant : au front des deux cités,  
A peine encore glissaient quelques pâles clartés,  
Lampes de la débauche, en naissant disparues,  
Derniers feux des festins oubliés dans les rues.  
De grands angles de mur, par la lune blanchis,  
Coupaient l'ombre, ou tremblaient dans une eau réfléchis.

Peut-être on entendait vaguement dans les plaines  
S'étouffer des baisers, se mêler des haleines,  
Et les deux villes sœurs, lassées des feux du jour,  
Murmurer mollement d'une étreinte d'amour ;  
Et le vent, soupirant sous le frais sycomore,  
Allait tout parfumé de Sodome à Gomorrhe.<sup>1</sup>

If there is any one who does not feel the beauty of these verses, French poetry, or that large part of it which is written in the great French metre, is a closed book to him. There have scarcely been a dozen poets in the history of the world who have united the imaginative power that conceives such a scene as this with the power of expression that paints it to such perfection that the reader sees it too !

But even this is not the loveliest picture in Hugo's gallery. He has challenged and rivalled—if romantic poet can ever rival classical—the great scenes of Milton's Eden, the 'bowery loneliness, The brooks of Eden mazily murmuring' which Tennyson loved even better than the scenes in Hell. Let us take the great dawn in Paradise, with which the *Légende des Siècles* opens:—

L'aurore apparaissait ; quelle aurore ? Un abîme  
D'éblouissement, vaste, insondable, sublime ;  
Une ardente lueur de paix et de bonté.  
C'était aux premiers temps du globe ; et la clarté  
Brillait sereine au front du ciel inaccessible,  
Étant tout ce que Dieu peut avoir de visible ;  
Tout s'illuminait, l'ombre et le brouillard obscur ;  
Des avalanches d'or s'écroutaient dans l'azur ;  
Le jour en flamme, au fond de la terre ravie,  
Embrassait les lointains splendides de la vie ;  
Les horizons, pleins d'ombre et de rocs chevelus  
Et d'arbres effrayants que l'homme ne voit plus,  
Luisaient, comme le songe et comme le vertige,  
Dans une profondeur d'éclair et de prodige :

<sup>1</sup> *Orientales*, first poem.

L'Éden pudique et nu s'éveillait mollement ;  
 Les oiseaux gazouillaient un hymne si charmant,  
 Si frais, si gracieux, si suave et si tendre,  
 Que les anges distraits se penchaient pour l'entendre ;

La prière semblait à la clarté mêlée :  
 Et sur cette nature encore immaculée  
 Qui du verbe éternel avait gardé l'accent,  
 Sur ce monde céleste, angélique, innocent,  
 Le matin, murmurant une sainte parole,  
 Souriait, et l'aurore était une auréole.

Les vents et les rayons semaient de tels délires  
 Que les forêts vibraient comme de grandes lyres ;  
 De l'ombre à la clarté, de la base au sommet,  
 Une fraternité vénérable germait ;

Une harmonie égale à la clarté, versant  
 Une extase divine au globe adolescent,  
 Semblait sortir du cœur mystérieux du monde ;  
 L'herbe en était émue, et le nuage, et l'onde,  
 Et même le rocher qui songe et qui se tait ;  
 L'arbre, tout pénétré de lumière, chantait ;  
 Chaque fleur, échangeant son souffle et sa pensée  
 Avec le ciel serein d'où tombe la rosée,  
 Recevait une perle et donnait un parfum ;  
 L'Être resplendissait, Un dans Tout, Tout dans Un ;  
 Le paradis brillait sous les sombres ramures  
 De la vie ivre d'ombre et pleine de murmures,  
 Et la lumière était faite de vérité ;  
 Et tout avait la grâce, ayant la pureté.  
 Tout était flamme, hymen, bonheur, douceur, clémence,  
 Tant ces immenses jours avaient une aube immense !<sup>1</sup>

You can never bring the classical and romantic poet to the same measure, any more than you can a man and a woman. Those who love the great manner, its calm, its self-possession, the poet's clear views and perfect mastery of his subject, will never quite feel that they have any compensation for their absence in all this ecstasy of words. They will have

<sup>1</sup> *Légende*, i. 27.

a sense that for them the poet is a little lost in the enthusiasm of his own eloquence and in this bewildering exuberance of detail. They will regret the severe concentration of the classics. Milton knows and chooses every step of his stately way: and you cannot change a word of his poem without loss. You could change many in Hugo: the eager ecstasy cannot stay to adjust its robes. But what a rare thing ecstasy is, and what a rare ecstasy is this! Has there ever been any other poet, except Shelley, who could have mingled in such mystical union the the Paradise of nature and the Paradise of spirit?

Or take another picture: no longer from *La Légende*, but still of Eve, a little later, taking her place now with Adam among *Les Malheureux*:—

Ils venaient tous les deux s'asseoir sur une pierre,  
 En présence des monts fauves et soucieux,  
 Et de l'éternité formidable des cieux.  
 Leur œil triste rendait la nature farouche.  
 Et là, sans qu'il sortît un souffle de leur bouche,  
 Les mains sur leurs genoux, et se tournant le dos,  
 Accablés comme ceux qui portent des fardeaux,  
 Sans autre mouvement de vie extérieure  
 Que de baisser plus bas la tête d'heure en heure,  
 Dans une stupeur morne et fatale absorbés,  
 Froids, livides, hagards, ils regardaient, courbés  
 Sous l'être illimité sans figure et sans nombre,  
 L'un décroître le jour, et l'autre, grandir l'ombre.  
 Et, tandis que montaient les constellations,  
 Et que la première onde aux premiers alcyons  
 Donnait sous l'infini le long baiser nocturne,  
 Et qu'ainsi que des fleurs tombant à flots d'une urne  
 Les astres fourmillants emplissaient le ciel noir,  
 Ils songeaient et, rêveurs, sans entendre, sans voir,  
 Sourds aux rumeurs des mers d'où l'ouragan s'élance,  
 Toute la nuit, dans l'ombre, ils pleuraient en silence,  
 Ils pleuraient tous les deux, aïeux du genre humain,  
 Le père sur Abel, la mère sur Caïn.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> *Conf.* ii. 122.



If it is part of the business of poetry, as I was saying, to make us see things new and old, our mother earth, our common humanity, in a light of strange and unforgettable beauty, who has performed it better than Hugo here? Where better than here can we see, as in a picture, the silent and indifferent splendours of Nature in their eternal contrast with the sorrows of humanity?

But Hugo is far from being, like the poets of the school of Leconte de Lisle, a mere painter of pictures. His imagination can see the world in action as well as the world in repose. The whole *Légende des Siècles*, for instance, is not only the greatest attempt made by a poet in the nineteenth century to bring the whole of humanity dead and living to his judgment as Dante brought it in the *Commedia*: it is also an amazing series of scenes from the life of man in all the multifarious forms his activity has taken from the innocence of Eden to the crimes of Pio Nono and Napoleon III. And the whole is carried through with an unflagging energy which only belongs to the giants, and executed—in spite of the grave faults, diffuseness, rhetoric, want of dignity, want of the sense of proportion—with an energy, a picturesqueness, a mastery of language and of verse, which are a veritable triumph, silencing everything else in amazed admiration. And the most striking thing in it as a whole is the range of interest and imagination. It slides off, no doubt, far too easily into the poet's besetting sin of vague declamation about things in general: but a book containing such things of beauty as the Eden scenes I have quoted, the wonderful sea-piece in *Le Phare*, or again 'les Jardins de Babylone' in *Les Sept Merveilles du*

*Monde*, such things of terror as the tale of Canute and the *Vision de Dante*, such tales mingled of terror and beauty as *Eviradnus*, such ballads as *La Chanson des Aventuriers de la Mer*, such idylls as *La Rose de l'Infante*, an idyll which is so much else too, such a lyric as that tremendous song of annihilation, *L'Épopée du Ver*, is an achievement which might well have been the whole production of a very fertile and varied genius. It is only a fragment of Hugo's. Let us take two things from it to illustrate the immense energy with which he can throw himself into phases of life the very opposite of those dreaming pictures I am quoting just now. Take, for instance, the tale of Canute the parricide. Whether it has any historical foundation I cannot discover, and it does not greatly matter : what matters is the imaginative power with which it is told. Canute secretly kills his father, becomes king, reigns in unequalled prosperity, dies, and is buried, and his priests declare they see him seated as a saint at the right hand of God. But their canonising voices have scarcely ceased when the ghostly king rises from his tomb, takes his sword and, gates and walls being no bars to spirits, goes forth to the mountains : for the thing he lacks in his stately grave is a shroud of snow :

Il alla droit au mont Savo que le temps ronge,  
Et Kanut s'approcha de ce farouche aïeul,  
Et lui dit : Laisse-moi, pour m'en faire un linceul,  
O montagne Savo que la tourmente assiège,  
Me couper un morceau de ton manteau de neige.  
Le mont le reconnut et n'osa refuser.  
Kanut prit son épée impossible à briser,  
Et sur le mont, tremblant devant ce belluaire,  
Il coupa de la neige et s'en fit un suaire :  
Puis il cria —Vieux mont, la mort éclaire peu ;  
De quel côté faut-il aller pour trouver Dieu ?

Le mont, au flanc difforme, aux gorges obstruées,  
 Noir, triste dans le vol éternel des nuées  
 Lui dit : Je ne sais pas, spectre, je suis ici.<sup>1</sup>

And so he goes out, clothed in his shroud of snow,  
 Seul, dans le grand silence et dans la grande nuit :  
 Là pas d'astre : et pourtant on ne sait quel regard  
 Tombe de ce chaos immobile et hagard :

this is the place of death, he thinks: beyond, there will be—God. He advances, calls aloud, reassured by his white robe, but receives no answer. Still he advances, and suddenly is conscious of something like a black star appearing close by him: and it grows closer and bigger: and then he sees a drop of blood has fallen on his shroud. He starts in horror, but once more presses forward. But a second drop, and a third, falls: he turns out of his path to left and to right, but still they fall on him: he would go back to his grave, but he cannot: he stands still and would pray, but his prayer is silenced by another drop of blood.

Il voyait, plus tremblant qu'au vent le peuplier,  
 Les tâches s'élargir et se multiplier :  
 Une autre, une autre, une autre, une autre, o cieux  
 funèbres !  
 Leur passage rayait vaguement les ténèbres :  
 Ces gouttes dans les plis du linceul, finissant  
 Par se mêler, faisaient des nuages de sang :  
 Il marchait, il marchait : de l'insondable voûte  
 Le sang continuait à pleuvoir goutte à goutte,  
 Toujours, sans fin, sans bruit et comme s'il tombait  
 De ces pieds noirs qu'on voit la nuit pendre au gibet.

Enfin, marchant toujours comme en une fumée,  
 Il arriva devant une porte fermée  
 Sous laquelle passait un jour mystérieux ;  
 Alors sur son linceul il abaissa les yeux :

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<sup>1</sup> *Légende*, i. 212.

C'était l'endroit sacré, c'était l'endroit terrible :

On ne sait quel rayon de Dieu semble visible :

De derrière la porte on entend l'hosanna.

Le linceul était rouge et Kanut frissonna.

Et c'est pourquoi Kanut, fuyant devant l'aurore,

Et reculant, n'a pas osé paraître encore

Devant le juge au front duquel le soleil luit :

C'est pourquoi ce roi sombre est resté dans la nuit,

Et, sans pouvoir rentrer dans sa blancheur première,

Sentant, à chaque pas qu'il fait vers la lumière,

Une goutte de sang sur sa tête pleuvoir,

Rôde éternellement sous l'énorme ciel noir.

How many visions of Judgment are more awful than this? There is in it an almost Hebraic conviction of sin, a note scarcely heard in France since the days of the old Huguenot poet Agrippa d'Aubigné. And one is astonished to see how Racine's *Alexandrine* can adapt itself to become the voice of that stern prophet of humanity and justice who was Hugo. But his *Vision de Dante* is a still more tremendous effort of the imagination. Dante comes to him and tells him he had been called from his grave and told he was now to finish his great poem, and that he had had a vision in which he seemed to find himself in the empty, silent, motionless abyss, where behind the darkness there was a strange flame like a lighted torch behind a black curtain: and behind the light it seemed was one who was rapt in thought. And he said within himself: it is the face of the Judge: and he was afraid. And the horrors of the eternal descent through the abyss seized on him: the abyss in which, as one falls,

on songe à la vie, au soleil, aux amours,  
Et l'on pense toujours, et l'on tombe toujours !  
Et le froid du néant lentement vous pénètre !<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *Légende*, iv. 141.

And he sees a great angel with Justice written on his brow, who calls the dead, and they rise in a great multitude, rolling past the poet like a cloud or a wave: and some bear the marks of the sword, and some of the gibbet, and some of the torture: and they cry aloud, as they approach the great Brightness, for justice, justice at last, and vengeance from God. And the angel asks who their murderers were: and they say the soldiers. And then appears another mighty multitude, an army of horsemen and footmen, and they start at the light and bow their heads in fear for

Ils avaient ce front bas des bêtes enchaînées  
Quand, le loup étant pris au piège et garrotté,  
L'air terrible fait place à l'air épouvanté.<sup>1</sup>

And the first multitude cries for vengeance: but the soldiers say the guilt is not theirs: it is on their officers and not on them that punishment should fall. And the captains are summoned: and they pass the guilt on to the judges:

Nous n'étions que le bras, ils étaient la pensée.

And they too disappear: and the judges come: but they say the priests have always told them the kings were the images of God, and it is they who gave the orders which the judges have obeyed.

L'ange dit.—Amenez les images de Dieu.  
Des êtres monstrueux parurent.

And they come each alone on a throne, each throne set on a chariot, and a sword went before each, a sword looking like a cross turned upside down, and no man held the sword, and it seemed a living thing.

<sup>1</sup> *Légende*, iv. 148.

And the groans of their victims sounded all round them as they came. And the last was the ugliest of all:

Le dernier qui venait, horrible au milieu d'eux,  
Était à chaque marche encombré de squelettes  
Et de cadavres froids aux bouches violettes,  
Et le plancher rougi fumait, de sang baigné ;  
Le char qui le portait dans l'ombre était traîné  
Par un hibou tenant dans sa griffe une hache.  
Un être aux yeux de loup, homme par la moustache,<sup>1</sup>  
Au sommet de ce char s'agitait étonné,  
Et se courbait furtif, livide et couronné.  
Pas un de ces Césars à l'allure guerrière  
Ne regardait cet homme. À l'écart, et derrière,  
Vêtu d'un noir manteau qui semblait un linceul,  
Espèce de lépreux du trône, il venait seul ;  
Il posait les deux mains sur sa face morose  
Comme pour empêcher qu'on y vît quelque chose ;  
Quand parfois il ôtait ses mains en se baissant  
En lettres qui semblaient faites avec du sang  
On lisait sur son front ces trois mots : Je le jure.

Quoiqu'ils fussent encore au fond de l'ombre obscure,  
Hommes hideux, de traits et d'âge différents,  
Je les distinguais tous, car ils étaient très grands.  
Je crus voir les titans de l'antique nature.  
Mais ces géants brumeux décroissaient à mesure  
Qu'ils s'éloignaient du point dont ils étaient partis,  
Et, plus ils approchaient, plus ils étaient petits.  
Ils entraient par degrés dans la stature humaine ;  
La clarté les fondait ainsi qu'une ombre vaine :  
Eux que j'avais crus hauts plus que les Apennins,  
Quand ils furent tout près de moi, c'étaient des nains.  
Et l'ange, se dressant dans la brume indécise,  
Était penché sur eux comme la tour de Pise.<sup>2</sup>

The kings, quickly humbled after a proud opening, shift their crimes on the Pope. 'To him we have been taught to listen as thine own Voice : he himself has told us, "in me ye behold Jesus Christ Himself." And it is he who, when we have struck down justice

<sup>1</sup> This figure is, of course, Napoleon III.

<sup>2</sup> *Légende*, iv. 154.

and liberty, has urged us on, and, when we hesitated to kill, has redoubled our blows. It is he who has put hell in our hearts in place of heaven. Let him pay the penalty.' And then, last of all,

Un vieillard blanc et pâle apparut dans la nuit.

It is Pius IX.

Debout, morne, il tremblait comme un homme qui fuit,  
Et des mains le tenaient au collet dans la brume.  
Vêtu de lin plus blanc qu'un encensoir qui fume,  
Il avait, spectre blême aux idoles pareil,  
Les baisers de la foule empreints sur son orteil,  
Dans sa droite un bâton comme l'antique archonte,  
Sur son front la tiare et dans ses yeux la honte.  
De son cou descendait un long manteau doré,  
Et dans son poignet gauche il tenait, effaré,  
Comme un voleur surpris par celui qu'il dérobe,  
Des clefs qu'il essayait de cacher sous sa robe.

And all the thousands of voices, murderers and murdered, judges and captains and kings, call aloud : 'C'est lui'; and Louis Napoleon adds his special word :

Et l'homme-loup, debout sur les cadavres pâles  
Dont le sang tiède encor tombait dans l'infini,  
Cria d'une voix rauque et sourde :—Il m'a béni !

And the angel calls on the Pope for his answer : and then, says Dante,

je vis le spectacle horrible et surprenant  
D'un homme qui vieillit pendant qu'on le regarde.  
L'agonie éteignit sa prunelle hagarde,  
Sa bouche bégaya, son jarret se rompit,  
Ses cheveux blanchissaient sur son front décrépît,  
Ses tempes se ridaient comme si les années  
S'étaient subitement sur sa face acharnées,  
Ses yeux pleuraient, ses dents claquaient comme au gibet  
Les genoux d'un squelette, et sa peau se plombait,  
Et, stupide, il baissait, à chaque instant plus pâle,  
Sa tête qu'écrasait la tiare papale.

L'ange dit :

Comprends-tu, vieillard, ce que tu vois ?

Il frappa sa poitrine et demeura sans voix,

Et je vis, O terreur ! qu'il vieillissait encore.

And the angel asks him whether he has any above him on whom he can cast his sin : and he answers,

Je n'ai que vous, mon Dieu !

and a Light shines, and a great Voice speaks out of the clouds, and calls on Pius to answer how he has fulfilled his awful trust : and then, in the silence,

L'homme resta béant, et sans cri, sans prière,

Et sans souffle, il tomba les deux mains en arrière,

Comme s'il eût été poussé par la clarté.

Je sentis tressaillir l'obscur éternité.

It is characteristic of Hugo's uncertainty of taste that he cannot end on that great note, but adds four lines on an altogether lower level. It is by accumulation, by exuberance of imagination and expression, never by distinction or selection, that he achieves his great effects : it is by the same exuberance, and by the lack of the sense that demands distinction, that he so often ruins them. The one thing that never fails is the eye. It is impossible to forget such vivid and pregnant touches as that of the Pope growing suddenly old before Dante's eyes, or the kings who loomed so large in the distance and when they had come near were seen to be dwarfs, or the swords carried before them which the poet, with the awful precision of these great moments, sees to be crosses, only crosses reversed and turned upside down. And it is not only in the *Légende* that such things occur. The best passages in *Les Châtiments*, and in *L'Année Terrible*, would have burnt themselves into every memory if they had stood alone : as it is, one is



dulled before reaching them, and deadened after, by the fatiguing boom of the poet's big drums of declamation.

But, great as he is, and not only, though so often, grandiose, in these high tragic worlds of human deed and destiny, it is in quite other fields that he is greatest of all. The essential, ultimate, unforgettable Hugo is not the one who blows loud notes through the trumpet of history, not so much at least as the one who whispers through the babbling of children, the notes of birds, the voices of clouds and trees and flowers. The prayer that all the fair things in the garden of his childhood made to his mother, 'Laissons cet enfant,' as he tells it in his charming poem, 'Ce qui se passait aux Feuillantines,'<sup>1</sup> was not left unanswered. Indeed it was answered in a wider way and to a wider world than garden walls can dream of. The child who dreamed and played in that old garden, and for whom the trees and flowers pleaded so persuasively, never was quite taken away from them either by the schoolmaster or by the world. To the very end of his life the better part of him never forgot the lessons of the three masters of his childhood, *un jardin, un vieux prêtre, et ma mère*.

J'eus, dans ma blonde enfance, hélas ! trop éphémère,  
Trois maîtres ;—un jardin, un vieux prêtre, et ma mère.  
Le jardin était grand, profond, mystérieux,  
Fermé par de hauts murs aux regards curieux,  
Semé de fleurs s'ouvrant ainsi que les paupières,  
Et d'insectes vermeils qui couraient sur les pierres,  
Plein de bourdonnements et de confuses voix :  
Au milieu, presque un champ, dans le fond, presque un bois.  
Le prêtre, tout nourri de Tacite et d'Homère,  
Était un doux vieillard. Ma mère—était ma mère !<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *Rayons*, 119.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.* 115.

What a world away we are from the *Vision de Dante*! But, great as that Victor Hugo is, this one is even greater. *Les grandes pensées viennent du cœur*. It was so with Hugo. The things written in the child's heart were never erased. They suffered strange transformations: they were buried in rhetoric: they were lost in egoism, in pose, in vanity, in violence. But they were still there, written so well once for all that the world may read them there for ever. The old priest's lesson remained to keep him, through all wanderings of creed, always a believer that there is an Invisible behind the visible, and that the human can never be explained except by the Divine. The garden voices whispered to him all his life, kept him from being wholly swallowed up in politics or the world or even in that deeper gulf, himself: were his joy in his good days and his consolation in his bad: above all, gave him the key which interpreted for him greater voices than theirs, and made him the poet of clouds and storms and sea. And his mother made him the greatest, perhaps the only great, poet France has known of the love which is not passion.

More and more all through his life Hugo hated priests and was hated by them. Yet, if priests could look at essentials and not at externals, they might have seen that in the biggest fight of all Hugo was not against them but with them. It is something that, just in the two generations when physical science was half persuading the world that there were no problems it could not solve, the greatest poet of the race that most moves other races was not a materialist but a believer in spirit.

A thinker he was not: he could not have made the reasoned contributions of Tennyson or Browning to a spiritual interpretation of the world: but he was as passionately convinced as either that man is more than a body and life more than a journey to the grave. He would often have gone as far as that great saying of Tennyson's: 'Nothing worthy of proving can be proven.' The Tennysonian question is always in his mouth—

Quelle est la fin de tout ? la vie ou bien la tombe ?  
Est-ce l'onde où l'on flotte ? est-ce l'onde où l'on tombe ?<sup>1</sup>

or again, still more exactly, in the great 'Pleurs dans la Nuit,' after his daughter's death :

Qu'importe la lumière, et l'aurore, et les astres,  
Fleurs des chapiteaux bleus, diamants des pilastres  
Du profond firmament,  
Et mai qui nous caresse, et l'enfant qui nous charme,  
Si tout n'est qu'un soupir, si tout n'est qu'une larme,  
Si tout n'est qu'un moment !<sup>2</sup>

And his answer, when he gives it, is always the Tennysonian answer :

Je veux être ici-bas libre, ailleurs responsable,  
Je suis plus qu'un brin d'herbe, et plus qu'un grain de sable ;  
Je me sens à jamais pensif, ailé, vivant.<sup>3</sup>

Faith, in his eyes, is the act of great souls and minds, not of little. There is a credulity in spiritual things which it is good to avoid. But even with that it is true, as Aubrey de Vere profoundly said, that 'the crowd escapes it not by being above it, but by being below it.' And how much more true is that of anything that can be called faith ! So, at least, thought

<sup>1</sup> *Voix Intérieures*, 35.    <sup>2</sup> *Cont.* ii. 141.    <sup>3</sup> *Légende*, iv. 182.

Hugo. We are too small, all but a few of us, to hold more than a little of the truth :

Le vase est trop petit pour la contenir toute ;<sup>1</sup>

and so, feeble creatures as we are, we fall back upon negation :

Aussi repousser Rome, et rejeter Sion,  
Rire, et conclure tout par la négation,  
Comme c'est plus aisé, c'est ce que font les hommes.  
Le peu que nous croyons tient au peu que nous sommes.<sup>2</sup>

For Hugo the secret is not so easy, and the end is not yet. But he is sure that the sense of a secret which will be made plain when the fit time comes is no ghastly illusion but the truest thing we can cling to. And meanwhile he can wait in serene assurance :

Et, tâchant d'être bon, je laisse, ô mon ami,  
Passer l'un après l'autre, en cette ombre où nous sommes,  
Tous les faux lendemains de la terre et des hommes,  
Sûr de ce lendemain immense du ciel bleu  
Qu'on appelle la mort et que j'appelle Dieu.<sup>3</sup>

Sometimes he will put his creed into a reasoned statement, and make poetry argue for faith. He uses the argument of the ascending scale of being, for instance, in a manner which reminds one curiously of Browning :

L'échelle que tu vois, crois-tu qu'elle se rompe ?  
Crois-tu, toi dont les sens d'en haut sont éclairés,  
Que la création qui, lente et par degrés,  
S'élève à la lumière, et dans sa marche entière,  
Fait de plus de clarté luire moins de matière  
Et mêle plus d'instinct au monstre décroissant,  
Crois-tu que cette vie énorme, remplissant

<sup>1</sup> *Voix Intérieures, Penser, Dudar, 193.*    <sup>2</sup> *Voix Intérieures, 192.*

<sup>3</sup> *Toute la Lyre, i. 202.*

De souffles le feuillage et de lucurs la tête,  
 Qui va du roc à l'arbre et de l'arbre à la bête,  
 Et de la pierre à toi monte insensiblement,  
 S'arrête sur l'abîme à l'homme, escarpement ?  
 Non, elle continue invincible, admirable,  
 Entre dans l'invisible et dans l'impondérable,  
 Y disparaît pour toi, chair vile, emplit l'azur  
 D'un monde éblouissant, miroir du monde obscur,  
 D'êtres voisins de l'homme et d'autres qui s'éloignent,  
 D'esprits purs, de voyants dont les splendeurs témoignent,  
 D'anges faits de rayons, comme l'homme d'instincts ;  
 Elle plonge à travers les cieus jamais éteints,  
 Sublime ascension d'échelles étoilées,  
 Des démons enchaînés monte aux âmes ailées,

Relie, en traversant des millions de lieues,  
 Les groupes constellés et les légions bleues,  
 Peuple le haut, le bas, les bords et le milieu,  
 Et dans les profondeurs s'évanouit en Dieu !<sup>1</sup>

Of course Browning would give the argument a more Christian turn ; but of Browning's Christianity there is nothing in Hugo. All the things that play such a great part in Browning's work, the definite Yes or No of a definite creed, the Person of Christ, what He was, and whether His life is a thing of merely historical interest or of eternal import, faith burnt into the tissue of daily life, a sense of sin, you will not find any of these in Hugo, at least when he is speaking for himself. Once, and once only, does he show a trace of feeling, in his own person, what that last means. It is in the remarkable poem 'A Louis B.' in *Les Chants du Crépuscule*, where, in one of his finest flights of metaphor, he compares his soul to the great Church bell, each with the name of God graven on it at the beginning,<sup>2</sup> each scrawled over with the base scrib-

<sup>1</sup> *Cont.* ii. 238.

<sup>2</sup> *Crépuscule*, 202.

blings of alien intruders from the world outside, so that in each alike the holy name, which was the first it received, is illegible and ruined. And he will, now and then, cry out in such phrases as that in *Les Voix Intérieures*:

Mais parmi ces progrès dont notre âge se vante,  
Dans tout ce grand éclat d'un siècle éblouissant,  
Une chose, ô Jésus, en secret m'épouvante,  
C'est l'écho de ta voix qui va s'affaiblissant.<sup>1</sup>

But, more often, his faith is a rather airy optimism. Such sayings as,

Un petit oiseau, sous les feuilles,  
Chantant, suffit à prouver Dieu,<sup>2</sup>

have none of the note of personal experience and conviction that rings so clear in Browning's

God's in his heaven,  
All's right with the world.

Still he shared a deeper mood with Browning. Both felt that love was the final word of the world, rising clear above all contradictions. And more: both saw in human love the key to the great mystery. Love here must mean love also There.

L'amour, qu'il vienne tôt ou tard,  
Prouve Dieu dans notre âme sombre.  
Il faut bien un corps quelque part  
Pour que le miroir ait une ombre.<sup>3</sup>

And so, when the great sorrow of his life came, and the daughter died, who was perhaps what he loved best in all the world, and her young husband died with her in the attempt to save her, the noble outburst of *Elegy*, which fills the fourth book of *Les Contemplations*, is never a cry of bitterness, never a

<sup>1</sup> *Voix intérieures*, 13.    <sup>2</sup> *Chansons*, 140.    <sup>3</sup> *Rayons*, 164.

cry of despair: the last words are words of resignation, of peace, even of hope. One hardly dares take fragments of this wonderful series out of their place, any more than one would move the grass on a grave. But it is impossible entirely to pass over the greatest moment in the poet's life. He makes no pretence that faith and hope can swallow up grief: 'I must also feel it as a man' is his last word: but it is never said so movingly as after the calm of resignation has come back. That grief, just because it is more than grief, will not die but live. It has become one with things greater than itself.

Maintenant que Paris, ses pavés et ses marbres,  
Et sa brume et ses toits, sont bien loin de mes yeux ;  
Maintenant que je suis sous les branches des arbres,  
Et que je puis songer à la beauté des cieux ;

Maintenant que du deuil qui m'a fait l'âme obscure  
Je sors, pâle et vainqueur,  
Et que je sens la paix de la grande nature  
Qui m'entre dans le cœur :

Maintenant que je puis, assis au bord des ondes,  
Ému par ce superbe et tranquille horizon,  
Examiner en moi les vérités profondes  
Et regarder les fleurs qui sont dans le gazon ;

Maintenant, ô mon Dieu ! que j'ai ce calme sombre  
De pouvoir désormais  
Voir de mes yeux la pierre où je sais que dans l'ombre  
Elle dort pour jamais ;

Maintenant qu'attendri par ces divins spectacles,  
Plaines, forêts, rochers, vallons, fleuve argenté,  
Voyant ma petitesse et voyant vos miracles,  
Je reprends ma raison devant l'immensité ;

Je viens à vous, Seigneur, père auquel il faut croire ;  
Je vous porte, apaisé,  
Les morceaux de ce cœur tout plein de votre gloire  
Que vous avez brisé ;

Je viens à vous, Seigneur ! confessant que vous êtes  
Bon, clément, indulgent et doux, ô Dieu vivant !  
Je conviens que vous seul savez ce que vous faites,  
Et que l'homme n'est rien qu'un jonc qui tremble au vent ;

Je ne résiste plus à tout ce qui m'arrive

Par votre volonté.

L'âme de deuils en deuils, l'homme de rive en rive,  
Roule à l'éternité.<sup>1</sup>

But neither resignation, nor even faith, can forbid tears. Indeed, the grief which cannot weep is of another sort altogether, the sort which is hard because it is hopeless.

Seigneur, je reconnais que l'homme est en délire  
S'il ose murmurer ;

Je cesse d'accuser, je cesse de maudire,  
Mais laissez-moi pleurer !

Hélas ! laissez les pleurs couler de ma paupière,  
Puisque vous avez fait les hommes pour cela !  
Laissez-moi me pencher sur cette froide pierre  
Et dire à mon enfant : Sens-tu que je suis là ?

Ne vous irritez pas ! fronts que le deuil réclame,  
Mortels sujets aux pleurs,  
Il nous est malaisé de retirer notre âme  
De ces grandes douleurs.

Voyez-vous, nos enfants nous sont bien nécessaires,  
Seigneur ; quand on a vu dans sa vie, un matin,  
Au milieu des ennuis, des peines, des misères,  
Et de l'ombre que fait sur nous notre destin,

Apparaître un enfant, tête chère et sacrée,  
Petit être joyeux,  
Si beau qu'on a cru voir s'ouvrir à son entrée  
Une porte des cieux ;

Quand on a vu, seize ans, de cet autre soi-même  
Croître la grâce aimable et la douce raison,  
Lorsqu'on a reconnu que cet enfant qu'on aime  
Fait le jour dans notre âme, et dans notre maison ;

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<sup>1</sup> Cont. ii, 33, *A Villequier*.



Que c'est la seule joie ici-bas qui persiste  
 De tout ce qu'on rêva,  
 Considérez que c'est une chose bien triste  
 De le voir qui s'en va !

*Je viens à vous, Seigneur, père auquel il faut croire*; that is the substance of what remains at the end to Victor Hugo of all the teaching of the old priest: submission to a Power which is visible, faith that behind that visible Power is invisible Fatherhood, and, as the next stanza shows, living personality of Love. Such a creed as this, the creed of Hugo's most spiritual moments, would no doubt have appeared to the old priest a sorry remnant of his lessons. But, whatever view be taken of it, no reader of the poet's works will doubt that it was a real creed, the faith of all that was most genuine and serious in the man.

The teaching of the second of the masters of his childhood had a very different destiny. If the priest would have wondered later on at what his pupil had forgotten, the garden would equally have wondered at what he had learnt. It had given him an alphabet, and he had made of it a new and splendid language. The child listened, the man remembered, and the poet created; and Victor Hugo became one of the greatest of all the interpreters of Nature to man. There is not one of her moods which he does not give: her gaiety often, her gloom not less often, her angelic innocence sometimes, rarely her cruelty, her soothing sympathy almost constantly. It was not by a knowledge of details that he came so close to her, but by

a communion of spirit. He knew her, not as we know the things we have learnt, but as we know the beings whom we love. Here, as elsewhere, it is the sense of beauty that comes first: then the love that is born of it: then the overpowering, over-awing sense of mystery which comes when love has revealed how much more there is in beauty than can ever be said or seen.

The beginning of the poetry of Nature is the Wordsworthian 'wise passiveness.' The poet must listen and let Nature speak. And she will not speak to every one. She is ungrateful enough, for instance, to prefer those who wander idly in gardens to those who busily lay them out and plant them. And even the idlers must be choice spirits. 'O Tiger Lily,' says Alice in Lewis Carroll's immortal fairy-tale, 'I wish you could talk!' 'We can,' said the Tiger Lily, 'when there's anybody worth talking to.' There is the whole philosophy of nature poetry. The grocer hears no voices on Derwentwater, not because Derwentwater is only a lake, but because the grocer is only a grocer. Wordsworth hears what he hears because he is what he is. And so with Hugo. What things he hears! A whole study might be given to his nature work alone. All that can be done here is to give a few specimens of its range and its depth. It rests not on exact or detailed knowledge, but on sympathetic penetration. 'Nature seen through a temperament' is not the worst definition of art, and there is no art which it fits better than that of Hugo. A tree or a flower, a lake or the sea, in passing through Hugo's temperament is transformed from an object

known by sight or touch or hearing, to a being, to a living presence, dimly yet most powerfully apprehended by senses rarer, more august, and more authoritative than those plain ones of daily use. This is true, of course, to some extent of all great poets who touch nature: and only those to whom the greatest things in poetry are closed will think that such transformations are pretty fancies, or metaphors, or mere literary traditions. They are the witness of great poets, which means the witness of the greatest of all thinkers, to that faith in a mysterious and ultimate unity underlying all creation which, darkly and differently understood, has come down through the ages from the Psalmists and Plato and Virgil to Wordsworth and Tennyson and Victor Hugo.

Take it in its very simplest form, so elementary as to escape notice, till you put this welcome to spring beside such things as even the spring odes of Horace and see how, in its presence, for all their beauty, they seem narrow and limited, with a note that hardly rises above that of rejoicing at the escape from wintry discomfort:

Louis, voici le temps de respirer les roses,  
 Et d'ouvrir bruyamment les vitres longtemps closes ;  
 Le temps d'admirer en rêvant  
 Tout ce que la nature a de beautés divines  
 Qui flottent sur les monts, les bois et les ravines,  
 Avec l'onde, l'ombre et le vent.

Louis, voici le temps de reposer son âme  
 Dans ce calme sourire empreint de vague flamme  
 Qui rayonne au front du ciel pur :  
 De dilater son cœur ainsi qu'une eau qui fume,  
 Et d'en faire envoler la nuée et la brume  
 A travers le limpide azur.

Fumée, onde, vapeur, de loin comme de près,  
 —Non sans faire avec tout des échanges secrets,—  
 Elle a dérobé tout, son calme à l'antré sombre,  
 Au diamant sa flamme, à la forêt son ombre,  
 Et peut-être, qui sait ? sur l'aile du matin,  
 Quelque ineffable haleine à l'océan lointain.  
 Et, vivant alambic que Dieu lui-même forme,  
 Où filtre et se répand la terre, vase énorme,  
 Avec les bois, les champs, les nuages, les eaux,  
 Et l'air tout pénétré des chansons des oiseaux,  
 La racine, humble, obscure, au travail résignée,  
 Pour la superbe fleur par le soleil baignée,  
 A, sans en rien garder, fait ce parfum si doux  
 Qui vient si mollement de la nature à vous,  
 Qui vous charme, et se mêle à votre esprit, madame,  
 Car l'âme d'une fleur parle au cœur d'une femme.

Encore un mot, et puis je vous laisse rêver.  
 Pour qu'atteignant au but où tout doit s'élever,  
 Chaque chose ici-bas prenne un attrait suprême,  
 Pour que la fleur embaume, et pour que la vierge aime,  
 Pour que, puisant la vie au grand centre commun,  
 La corolle ait une âme et la femme un parfum,  
 Sous le soleil qui luit, sous l'amour qui fascine,  
 Il faut, fleur de beauté, tenir par la racine,  
 L'une au monde idéal, l'autre au monde réel,  
 Les roses à la terre et les femmes au ciel.<sup>1</sup>

Is there any parallel to these exquisite lines except Shelley's still more exquisite 'With a Guitar. To Jane'?—the guitar that

had learnt all harmonies  
 Of the plains and of the skies,  
 Of the forests and the mountains,  
 And the many-voiced fountains,  
 The clearest echoes of the hills,  
 The softest notes of falling rills,  
 The melodies of birds and bees,  
 The murmuring of summer seas,  
 And pattering rain, and breathing dew,  
 And airs of evening : and it knew

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<sup>1</sup> *Rays*, xxviii. 171.

That seldom heard mysterious sound  
Which, driven on its diurnal round,  
As it floats through boundless day,  
Our world enkindles on its way—  
All this it knows——

No doubt Shelley, most divinely absorbed of poets, gets deeper into the heart of things than Hugo, who covers so much ground that he can hardly stay to explore it; for it is only Shakspeare who has the secret of touching all themes of human interest, and showing in each the sovereign intimacy of those who touch but one.

But let us follow Hugo a little further. This intimate sympathy, which with him as with Wordsworth makes man in the presence of nature take the place not of an observer from outside but of an interpreter from within, is carried into all moods. Indeed there is more in it even than that; Hugo, like Wordsworth, found that man never wins his own secret so well as at the moment when he is listening for nature to reveal hers.

Je ne vois pas pourquoi je ferais autre chose  
Que de rêver sous l'arbre où le ramier se pose ;  
Les chars passent, j'entends grincer les durs essieux ;

Quand les filles s'en vont laver à la fontaine,  
Elles prêtent l'oreille à ma chanson lointaine :  
Et moi je reste au fond des bois mystérieux,

Parce que le hallier m'offre des fleurs sans nombre,  
Parce qu'il me suffit de voir voler dans l'ombre  
Mon chant vers les esprits et l'oiseau vers les cieux.<sup>1</sup>

Only those to whom Nature means most can do these quiet things with her, which whisper so much that no loud verses can say. One only regrets

<sup>1</sup> *Lyre*, i. 86.

the forced antithesis of the last line, which is rather like that which spoils the end of Wordsworth's 'Skylark.' Here is another piece, with a little more open confession of itself: a voice of that ecstasy of evening of which we are all dimly conscious once or twice at least in our lives:

Quand la lune apparaît dans la brume des plaines,  
Quand l'ombre émue a l'air de retrouver la voix,  
Lorsque le soir emplit de frissons et d'haleine  
Les pâles ténèbres des bois,

Nous parlerons tout bas des choses infinies.  
Tout est grand, tout est doux, quoique tout soit obscur.  
Nous ouvrirons nos cœurs aux sombres harmonies  
Qui tombent du profond azur.<sup>1</sup>

But nature is not always in this mood of soothing gentleness. There is the night of Macbeth as well as the night of Lorenzo and Jessica:—

Seul au fond d'un désert, avez-vous quelque fois  
Entendu des éclats de rire dans les bois?  
Avez-vous fui, baigné d'une sueur glacée?  
Et, plongeant à demi l'œil de votre pensée  
Dans ce monde inconnu d'où sort la vision,  
Avez-vous médité sur la création  
Pleine, en ses profondeurs étranges et terribles,  
Du noir fourmillement des choses invisibles?<sup>2</sup>

Again and again he returns to this mystery of a darkness which can be felt:

Oh ! la nuit muette et livide  
Fait vibrer quelque chose en nous !  
Pourquoi cherche-t-on dans le vide ?  
Pourquoi tombe-t-on à genoux ?

Quelle est cette secrète fibre ?  
D'où vient que, sous ce morne effroi,  
Le moineau ne se sent plus libre,  
Le lion ne se sent plus roi ?

<sup>1</sup> *Toute la Lyre*, i. 90.

<sup>2</sup> *Lyre*, i. 128.

Questions dans l'ombre enfouies !  
 Au fond du ciel de deuil couvert,  
 Dans ces profondeurs inouïes,  
 Où l'âme plonge, où l'œil se perd,

Que se passe-t-il de terrible  
 Qui fait que l'homme, esprit banni,  
 A peur de votre calme horrible,  
 O ténèbres de l'infini ?<sup>1</sup>

The business of poetry is to say for us what we cannot say for ourselves. Who does not realise, when he reads such verses as these, how much he had felt of this dark terror of the night, though the experience had slumbered in him, subconscious, never rising to the surface of his acknowledged personality? But here it is, become conscious by the genius of a poet; the imagination has been made consciously alive to one more aspect of the vast possibilities which surround us, but are always being hidden from our eyes by a crowd of insignificant actualities. We are larger beings for the power of feeling nature in all her moods, which, if you like, are ours, but are yet somehow, we shall believe, more than ours. It is good to turn from one to another. Here is one, for instance, in which an evening walk suggests

Le ciel sinistre et métallique  
 A travers des arbres hideux ;

when

Des êtres rôdent sur les rives :  
 Le nénuphar nocturne éclot ;  
 Des agitations furtives  
 Courbent l'herbe, rident le flot ;

---

<sup>1</sup> *Lyre*, i. 138.

and when, as the walker goes on his way,

Au loin, une cloche, une enclume,  
Jettent dans l'air leurs faibles coups.  
A ses pieds flotte dans la brume  
Le paysage immense et doux.<sup>1</sup>

Where are four lines that give more of evening sounds and sights and sense than these? They recall the simplicity and power of Gray's *Elegy*. Even Victor Hugo has never got on to the paper more of the great things that float in the imaginative air than in this verse and those which follow it:

Tout s'éteint. L'horizon recule.  
Il regarde en ce lointain noir  
Se former dans le crépuscule  
Les vagues figures du soir.

La plaine, qu'une brise effleure,  
Ajoute, ouverte au vent des nuits,  
A la solennité de l'heure  
L'apaisement de tous les bruits.

A peine, ténébreux murmures,  
Entend-on, dans l'espace mort,  
Les palpitations obscures  
De ce qui veille quand tout dort.

Les broussailles, les grès, les ormes,  
Le vieux saule, le pan de mur,  
Deviennent les contours difformes  
De je ne sais quel monde obscur.

L'insecte aux nocturnes élytres  
Imite le cri des sabbats.  
Les étangs sont comme des vitres  
Par où l'on voit le ciel d'en bas.

Par degrés, monts, forêts, cieux, terre,  
Tout prend l'aspect terrible et grand  
D'un monde entrant dans un mystère,  
D'un navire dans l'ombre entrant.

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<sup>1</sup> *Lyre*, i. 133.



And here is another, full of mystery too, but of a mystery which has nothing dark or sinister about it :

Vois le soir qui descend calme et silencieux.

Trainant quelque branchage obscur et convulsif,  
Le bûcheron convoite en son esprit passif  
La marmite chauffant au feu son large ventre,  
Rit, et presse le pas : l'oiseau dort, le bœuf rentre,  
Les ânes chevelus passent portant leurs bâts ;  
Puis tout bruit cesse aux champs, et l'on entend tout bas  
Jaser la folle avoine et le pied d'alouette.  
Tandis que l'horizon se change en silhouette  
Et que les halliers noirs au souffle de la nuit  
Tressaillent, par endroits l'eau dans l'ombre reluit,  
Et les blancs nénuphars, fleurs où vivent des fées,  
Les bleus myosotis, les iris, les nymphées,  
Penchés et frissonnants, mirent leurs sombres yeux  
Dans de vagues miroirs, clairs et mystérieux.<sup>1</sup>

But it is in the presence of the sea, which has meant more, perhaps, to Hugo and his disciple Swinburne than to any other poets that have ever lived, that we get the final word combining both moods :

Le couchant flamboyait à travers les bruines  
Comme le fronton d'or d'un vieux temple en ruines.

L'arbre avait un frisson.

La mer au loin semblait, en ondes recourbée,  
Une colonne torse en marbre vert, tombée  
Sur l'énorme horizon.

La vague, roue errante, et l'écume, cavale,  
S'en fuyaient : je voyais luire par intervalle

Les cieux pleins de regards :

Les flots allaient, venaient, couraient sans fin, sans nombre,  
Et j'écoutais, penché sur le cirque de l'ombre,  
Le bruit de tous ces chars.

Lugubre immensité ! profondeurs redoutées !  
Tous sont là, les Satans comme les Prométhées,

Ténébreux océans !

Cieux, vous êtes l'abîme où tombent les génies,  
Oh ! combien l'œil au fond des brumes infinies  
Aperçoit de géants !

---

<sup>1</sup> *Lyre*, i. 120.

O vie, énigme, sphinx, nuit, sois la bienvenue !

Car je me sens d'accord avec l'âme inconnue.

Je souffre, mais je crois.

J'habite l'absolu, patrie obscure et sombre,

Pas plus intimidé dans tous ces gouffres d'ombre

Que l'oiseau dans les bois.

Je songe, l'œil fixé sur l'incompréhensible.

Le zénith est fermé. Les justes sont la cible

Du mensonge effronté :

Le bien, qui semble aveugle, a le mal pour ministre.

Mais rassuré, je vois sous la porte sinistre

La fente de clarté.<sup>1</sup>

We have seen what came of the teaching of the priest and the garden. But what of that of the third of his teachers, his mother? Well, there were a great many things in Victor Hugo's life, public and private, which were not what his mother meant them to be. But the greatest gift a man receives from his mother is his heart: and that gift Hugo kept all his life unchanged, or changing only to grow greater. All his fierce interest in politics never hardened his heart. He loved liberty, and democracy, no doubt, as the watchwords of a political creed: but he never made the common mistake of forgetting on their account the individual human beings without which they are mere names echoing idly in the air. It is no small part of his poetic strength that he always kept his hold on the great primal joys and sorrows which are the only noble emotions that can come into the majority of human lives. There is no subtlety in his treatment of them: but there is often a greater thing than subtlety, a kind of elemental and childlike simplicity. Hear

<sup>1</sup> *Lyre*, ii. 80.

him sending his daughter to her new home and her husband :

Aime celui qui t'aime, et sois heureuse en lui.  
—Adieu ! Sois son trésor, ô toi qui fus le nôtre !  
Va, mon enfant béni, d'une famille à l'autre.  
Emporte le bonheur et laisse nous l'ennui.

Ici l'on te retient, là-bas on te désire.  
Fille, épouse, ange, enfant, fais ton double devoir.  
Donne-nous un regret, donne-leur un espoir.  
Sors avec une larme ! entre avec un sourire !<sup>1</sup>

There is a bookishness about the antitheses which one wishes away ; but, except for that, it is almost as quiet as the tenderest things in the Greek anthology. One comes from it prepared for the solemn simplicity of his grief, four years later :

Pendant que le marin, qui calcule et qui doute,  
Demande son chemin aux constellations ;  
Pendant que le berger, l'œil plein de visions,  
Cherche au milieu des bois son étoile et sa route ;  
Pendant que l'astronome, inondé de rayons,

Pèse un globe à travers des millions de lieues,  
Moi je cherche autre chose en ce ciel vaste et pur.  
Mais que ce saphir sombre est un abîme obscur !  
On ne peut distinguer, la nuit, les robes bleues  
Des anges frissonnants qui glissent dans l'azur.<sup>2</sup>

One of the most wonderful things in Tolstoy's wonderful *Anna Karénine* is the picture of Levine on the morning after his engagement. 'What he saw that day he never saw again.' The children on their way to school ; the pigeons flying in the air : the little cakes that some one was arranging in a shop-window : all seemed extraordinary things to him. A child smiles, a pigeon's wings shine in the sun, the smell of the good cake comes through the

<sup>1</sup> *Cont.* ii. 7.

<sup>2</sup> *Cont.* ii. 26.

window; and these trifles are so big to him that he laughs aloud in his happiness. It is always so when we touch reality. We are conscious of being in possession of the secret, and everything we see must take its colour. Only there are two secrets. Whoever could be at the same time in perfect possession of both would have solved the eternal problem of humanity. As it is, many men never touch either; and the few, who touch both, have for the most part forgotten the one before they feel the other. So it was with Hugo. Perhaps he never felt the secret of life as Levine felt it: if he did he never managed to get it so vividly told as it is told in those pages of Tolstoy's. And when the secret of death takes possession of him it overwhelms all the rest. All the pleasant colours of life look trivial in its tremendous shadow, all life's hurrying activities look as unbelievably small from its height as farms and roads and houses look when seen from a mountain. And so, in a remarkable little poem, he can accumulate them, pile them up one upon another through nineteen lines, well knowing that there is a last line in reserve which will in a moment reduce them all to insignificance.

On vit, on parle, on a le ciel et les nuages  
 Sur la tête; on se plaît aux livres des vieux sages;  
 On lit Virgile et Dante; on va joyeusement  
 En voiture publique à quelque endroit charmant,  
 En riant aux éclats de l'auberge et du gîte;  
 Le regard d'une femme en passant vous agite;  
 On aime, on est aimé, bonheur qui manque aux rois!  
 On écoute le chant des oiseaux dans les bois;  
 Le matin, on s'éveille, et toute une famille  
 Vous embrasse, une mère, une sœur, une fille!  
 On déjeune en lisant son journal: tout le jour  
 On mêle à sa pensée espoir, travail, amour;

La vie arrive avec ses passions troublées ;  
On jette sa parole aux sombres assemblées ;  
Devant le but qu'on veut et le sort qui vous prend,  
On se sent faible et fort, on est petit et grand ;  
On est flot dans la foule, âme dans la tempête  
Tout vient et passe ; on est en deuil, on est en fête ;  
On arrive, on recule, on lutte avec effort . . .  
Puis, le vaste et profond silence de la mort !<sup>1</sup>

It is easy to criticise the feeble obviousness of such a commonplace as 'bonheur qui manque aux rois' ; or the ridiculous mixture of the smug citizen and the self-conscious genius in some of the other verses : but perhaps Hugo was happy here in being no critic and, above all, constitutionally incapable of associating banality with anything that came from his own pen. At any rate the solemn boom of that great last line could not have hushed us as it does without the contrast with the tinkling trivialities that precede it. And note how the effect is further heightened by the breathlessness which is kept up till the last line, without a pause anywhere, with scarcely a line that flows unbroken and none that finds rest. Nothing is finished : nothing is a whole that we can accept and be quiet in : the unsatisfied hurry of life continues throughout. And then comes the great escape of the last line, the escape into reality ; and all the chattering voices are gone out of the world in a moment, like a treeful of starlings at the report of a gun.

But death is, after all, the one universal source of tenderness. There is no one who is not moved at death. But there is more in Hugo than that. All the primary facts of life find in him their poet. Of

<sup>1</sup> *Cont.* ii. 27.

childhood, particularly, he has a unique mastery. There has never, perhaps, been a poet to whom children meant so much. They are everywhere in his poetry. A whole volume is dedicated to them in *L'Art d'être Grand-père*, and if the grandfather and his vanity fill too much space in it, it is still the greatest book of verse which children have ever inspired. Hugo would not have been Hugo if he had not been very pleased with himself in the rôle of grandfather; but, after all, if his delight in Jeanne and Georges is a little self-conscious, was ever anything more radiant, more gracious, more delicate? 'Devenir aïeul,' as he says, 'c'est rentrer dans l'aurore.'<sup>1</sup> It was so with him. The fingers of the dawn are not softer than his touch when he handles a child.

Jeanne parle ; elle dit des choses qu'elle ignore ;  
Elle envoie à la mer qui gronde, au bois sonore,  
A la nuée, aux fleurs, aux nids, au firmament,  
A l'immense nature un doux gazouillement,  
Tout un discours, profond peut-être, qu'elle achève  
Par un sourire où flotte une âme, où tremble un rêve,  
Murmure indistinct, vague, obscur, confus, brouillé.  
Dieu, le bon vieux grand-père, écoute émerveillé.<sup>2</sup>

He returns again and again to that kinship between the wise innocence of childhood and the inarticulate profundity of Nature. It inspires him with some of his most charming verses :

La rosée inondait les fleurs à peine écloses ;  
Elles jouaient, riant de leur rire sans fiel.  
Deux choses ici-bas vont bien avec les roses,  
Le rire des enfants et les larmes du ciel ;<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *Grand-père*, 12.

<sup>2</sup> *Grand-père*, 9.

<sup>3</sup> *Toute la Lyre*, ii. 74.

and often, also, with some of his most mystically beautiful, like the lines to his daughter Adèle in *Les Quatre Vents de l'Esprit*:

Tout enfant, tu dormais près de moi, rose et fraîche  
Comme un petit Jésus assoupi dans sa crèche ;  
Ton pur sommeil était si calme et si charmant  
Que tu n'entendais pas l'oiseau chanter dans l'ombre ;  
Moi, pensif, j'aspirais toute la douceur sombre  
Du mystérieux firmament.

Et j'écoutais voler sur ta tête les anges ;  
Et je te regardais dormir ; et sur tes langes  
J'effeuillais des jasmins et des œillets sans bruit ;  
Et je priais, veillant sur tes paupières closes ;  
Et mes yeux se mouillaient de pleurs, songeant aux choses  
Qui nous attendent dans la nuit.

Un jour mon tour viendra de dormir ; et ma couche,  
Faites d'ombre, sera si morne et si farouche  
Que je n'entendrai pas non plus chanter l'oiseau ;  
Et la nuit sera noire ; alors, ô ma colombe,  
Larmes, prière et fleurs, tu rendras à ma tombe  
Ce que j'ai fait pour ton berceau.<sup>1</sup>

'Therefore let thy words be few.' Childhood is almost the only thing great enough in Hugo's eyes to be able to say that to him. Again and again it compels him to this noble brevity. The sight of a child asleep can almost always do it:

Le regard de l'aube la couvre ;  
Rien n'est auguste et triomphant  
Comme cet œil de Dieu qui s'ouvre  
Sur les yeux fermés de l'enfant.<sup>2</sup>

So it is time after time, as, for instance, in the beautiful 'Jeanne Endormie' of *L'Art d'être Grand-père*. This 'gentleness of heaven' comes to

<sup>1</sup> *Quatre Vents*, II. No. xvi.

<sup>2</sup> *Chansons*, 214.

all of us a little at sight of the mystery that fills a cradle: but to Hugo it came supremely, the most uniquely great perhaps of all the gifts of his genius. The child Cosette is perhaps the most moving figure in the most wonderful of novels. And it is the same thing in his poetry. Never does the poet take such complete possession of us as when he has a child for his theme. How vividly happy are the pictures of the grandchildren at play in the *Grand-père*: how charming the verses 'A des Oiseaux Envolés,'<sup>1</sup> in which he calls them back after they had been exiled from his study for burning his papers: how lovely the portrait of the little Spanish Princess in that 'Rose de l'Infante,' which is one of the very finest things in the *Légende*!<sup>2</sup>

La rose épanouie et toute grande ouverte,  
Sortant du frais bouton comme d'une urne ouverte,  
Charge la petitesse exquise de sa main ;  
Quand l'enfant, allongeant ses lèvres de carmin,  
Fronce, en la respirant, sa riante narine,  
La magnifique fleur, royale et purpurine,  
Cache plus qu'à demi ce visage charmant,  
Si bien que l'œil hésite, et qu'on ne sait comment  
Distinguer de la fleur ce bel enfant qui joue,  
Et si l'on voit la rose ou si l'on voit la joue.  
Ses yeux bleus sont plus beaux sous son pur sourcil brun.  
En elle tout est joie, enchantement, parfum ;  
Quel doux regard, l'azur ! et quel doux nom, Marie !  
Tout est rayon ; son œil éclaire, et son nom prie.  
Pourtant, devant la vie et sous le firmament,  
Pauvre être ! elle se sent très grande vaguement ;  
Elle assiste au printemps, à la lumière, à l'ombre,  
Au grand soleil couchant horizontal et sombre,  
A la magnificence éclatante du soir,  
Aux ruisseaux murmurants qu'on entend sans les voir,  
Aux champs, à la nature éternelle et sereine,  
Avec la gravité d'une petite reine.

<sup>1</sup> *Voix Intérieures*, 164.

<sup>2</sup> *Légende*, iii. 42.



But, lovely as this and fifty other pictures of radiant childhood are, they are still not the things one remembers longest of all. The pathos in a child's face meant even more to Hugo than its beauty. Even here the exquisite little Infanta is set against a background of the doomed Armada, as the lovely girl<sup>1</sup> whose step made music in the streets of Paris is set against the hideous beldam with her 'Monsieur, veut-il de cette fille?' Nothing in *L'Année Terrible* is so sad as its children:<sup>2</sup> and nothing so beautiful as the exquisite lines to his granddaughter, 'A l'Enfant Malade Pendant le Siège.'<sup>3</sup>

Si vous continuez d'être ainsi toute pâle

Dans notre air étouffant,

Si je vous vois entrer dans mon ombre fatale,

Moi vieillard, vous enfant ;

Si je vois de nos jours se confondre la chaîne,

Moi qui sur mes genoux

Vous contemple, et qui veux la mort pour moi prochaine

Et lointaine pour vous ;

Si vos mains sont toujours diaphanes et frêles,

Si dans votre berceau,

Tremblante, vous avez l'air d'attendre des ailes

Comme un petit oiseau ;

Si vous ne semblez pas prendre sur notre terre

Racine pour longtemps,

Si vous laissez errer, Jeanne, en notre mystère

Vos doux yeux mécontents ;

Si je ne vous vois pas gaie et rose et très forte,

Si, triste, vous rêvez,

Si vous ne fermez pas derrière vous la porte

Par où vous arrivez ;

<sup>1</sup> *Quatre Vents*, I: xxii.

<sup>2</sup> *Année Terrible*, Juin x. xi.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, Novembre x.

Si je ne vous vois pas comme une belle femme  
 Marcher, vous bien porter,  
 Rire, et si vous semblez être une petite âme  
 Qui ne veut pas rester,

Je croirai qu'en ce monde où le suaire au lange  
 Parfois peut confiner,  
 Vous venez pour partir, et que vous êtes l'ange  
 Chargé de m'emmener.

There is no praise equal to such a thing as this: and yet there is one other poem of even more astonishing power, the five stanzas about the children of the poor, which Mr. Swinburne's incomparable rendering has made familiar to all lovers of English poetry. Perhaps the translator has even surpassed his original, treachery as he would hold it that we should say so: still, in any case the ineffable tenderness of the poem<sup>1</sup> is not his, but Hugo's. There is nothing quite like it so far as I know in all poetry.

Prenez garde à ce petit être ;  
 Il est bien grand, il contient Dieu.  
 Les enfants sont, avant de naître,  
 Des lumières dans le ciel bleu.

Dieu nous les offre en sa largesse ;  
 Ils viennent : Dieu nous en fait don.  
 Dans leur rire il met sa sagesse  
 Et dans leur baiser son pardon.

Leur douce clarté nous effleure.  
 Hélas, le bonheur est leur droit.  
 S'ils ont faim, le paradis pleure,  
 Et le ciel tremble, s'ils ont froid.

La misère de l'innocence  
 Accuse l'homme vicieux.  
 L'homme tient l'ange en sa puissance.  
 Oh ! quel tonnerre au fond des cieux,

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<sup>1</sup> *Grand-père*, xv. v. 180.

Quand Dieu, cherchant ces êtres frères  
 Que dans l'ombre où nous sommeillons  
 Il nous envoie avec des ailes  
 Les retrouve avec des haillons !

In this region Hugo is supreme. William Blake may perhaps have anticipated him once or twice : but Blake, as a whole, is as far below Hugo in poetry as he is above him in spiritual power. The only other poet whose name could be mentioned with Hugo's in this connection is his living disciple, the translator of this poem, Mr. Swinburne.

There must at last be an end of quotation. It is hard not to be able to find space for the beautiful stanzas in *Les Rayons et Les Ombres*,<sup>1</sup> which end with that fine praise of tears :

Toute larme, enfant,  
 Lave quelque chose ;

or for those on the tomb of a child which immediately precede them : or for those 'A la Mère de l'Enfant Mort' in *Les Contemplations*<sup>2</sup> : or for those addressed to Jeanne in the second volume of *Toute la Lyre*,<sup>3</sup> where the old man tells all the shame and sorrow of the world to his grandchild, and then comforts himself in her uncomprehending infancy :

Certes, si je pensais que j'assombris ton âme,  
 Je ne te dirais point toutes ces choses-là ;  
 Mais, vois-tu, bien qu'avril dore à sa pure flamme  
 Ton front, que Dieu pour moi tout exprès étoila,

Quoi que le ciel ait l'aube et mon cœur ton sourire,  
 Jeanne, la vie est morne, et l'on gémit parfois ;  
 Puisque tu n'as qu'un an, je puis bien tout te dire,  
 Tu comprends seulement la douceur de ma voix.

<sup>1</sup> *Rayons et Ombres*, xxxix. 235.

<sup>2</sup> *Cont.* i. 168

<sup>3</sup> *Toute la Lyre*, ii. 115.

And it would be easy to show the poet's tenderness stretching out its hands not only over childhood, but over all the innocence and weakness of humanity, and his sympathy going out to meet every natural joy and sorrow of mankind. But I must leave the children to speak for all the rest. Only it may be fair to add one word of explanation. It is 'the sense of tears in human things' that calls forth Hugo's greatest poetry. But he must not be supposed to see only the sad side of life. Far from that. He is even a poet of inextinguishable faith in the future: and, for the present, his ears catch a note of music in everything that moves in all the world. There is a poem in *Les Contemplations*<sup>1</sup> of which it has been remarked that it strangely recalls the work of André Chénier. And so it does, in a kind of Alexandrian suavity of form and utterance. But there is a democratic sympathy in it, a large humanity, a mystic universalism, which were out of the reach of Chénier's century. And with the poets who were the real descendants of Chénier's impeccable graciousness of form the contrast is even greater than with Chénier himself. In the hands of Leconte de Lisle the poem would have been a lament for a music of the universe which passed away with Paganism. In Hugo's it is the rejoicing echo of a music which can never pass away so long as earth is earth and man is man.

*Écrit sur la Plinthe d'un Bas-relief Antique.*

La musique est dans tout. Un hymne sort du monde.  
Rumeur de la galère aux flancs lavés par l'onde,

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<sup>1</sup> *Cont.*, i. 185.

Bruits des villes, pitié de la sœur pour la sœur,  
Passion des amants jeunes et beaux, douceur  
Des vieux époux usés ensemble par la vie,  
Fanfare de la plaine émaillée et ravie,  
Mots échangés le soir sur les seuils fraternels,  
Sombre tressaillement des chênes éternels,  
Vous êtes l'harmonie et la musique même !  
Vous êtes les soupirs qui font le chant suprême !  
Pour notre âme, les jours, la vie et les saisons,  
Les songes de nos cœurs, les plis des horizons,  
L'aube et ses pleurs, le soir et ses grands incendies,  
Flottent dans un réseau de vagues mélodies.  
Une voix dans les champs nous parle, une autre voix  
Dit à l'homme autre chose et chante dans les bois.  
Par moment, un troupeau bêle, une cloche tinte.  
Quand par l'ombre, la nuit, la colline est atteinte,  
De toutes parts on voit danser et resplendir,  
Dans le ciel étoilé du zénith au nadir,  
Dans la voix des oiseaux, dans le cri des cigales,  
*Le groupe éblouissant des notes inégales.*  
Toujours avec notre âme un doux bruit s'accoupla ;  
La nature nous dit : Chante ! Et c'est pour cela  
Qu'un statuaire ancien sculpta sur cette pierre  
Un pâtre sur sa flûte abaissant sa paupière.

There, then, is Hugo. I have tried to let him speak for himself. That, indeed, seemed the only way in which an essay could attempt to give an idea of his immense range, his exuberant power, his universal sympathy. More might have been said of his limitations: of the speculative poverty which is almost as conspicuous as his pictorial wealth: of the childish vanity which makes all his world a stage, and himself the only actor before its foot-lights: of the flimsy superficiality masquerading as omniscience which made him a lifelong journalist in all but anonymity: of his perpetual declamation, as violent often as that of the Revolution, often as empty as that of the monarchy of July: of his

shallow optimism, his unreasoned faith, his entire lack of critical distinction, his political, moral, and intellectual obviousness. These are grave defects: it is too early yet to say that there is no chance of their proving fatal. But at any rate I have preferred to try to bring out the positive qualities which, on the whole, as it seems to me, greatly over-balance them. We are often and justly severe on rhetoric. Yet it is fair to remember that rhetoric involves in its very essence a certain quality of largeness. No man can be a great rhetorician without realising, what ordinary men do not realise, the greatness of the great commonplaces of life. Other people accept them: the rhetorician must, to a greater or less degree, feel them. And then his work cannot be done with the petty and insignificant. He has to use ideas that have some element of greatness, true or false, in them. Without the appearance, at least, of large conceptions he cannot produce the effect at which he aims. So it becomes as much a part of his temperament to seek after great or grandiose ideas as it is a part of the temperament of the practical man to avoid them. That results, of course, in the empty stuff that fills the waste-paper baskets both of poetry and of politics. It results in the echoing hollowness that reverberates through so many pages of such men as Bossuet or Rousseau or Byron. But if these great men suffer by it, it is fair to admit that they also gain. It was precisely that very rhetorical cast of mind, demanding great things at any cost, that made Bossuet the founder of the great conception of the unity of history, and enabled him, in his stately funeral

sermons, to make of nothingness itself the most majestic of realities. It was that temperament that made Rousseau, and not Voltaire, the voice that prepared the way of the French Revolution. It was that temperament that made of Byron the first English poet whom all Europe united to acclaim. And so with Hugo. The rhetorician in him was for ever leading him away into a wilderness of verbiage. But the same temperament that made him a rhetorician had also something to do with making him the greatest poet of his day. To begin with, it decided the most important event in his literary life by carrying him into the Romantic movement in which eloquence played such a large part. There he found, in such accepted heroes of Romanticism as Ossian and Chateaubriand, Scott and Byron, a love of colour and action, and an interest in the Middle Age, which were all to his taste; and in its school were developed some of the best things he had in him: his gift of dreaming, his sense of the intimacy of things, his intuition of the mystic unity of the world towards which Plato might draw his solitary bow at a venture but which only Romanticism, trained by centuries of Christianity, could fully attain. There also he found the natural home of his unique mastery of the shapes of things. He became the very centre of the Romantic reaction against the eighteenth-century habit of generalising away all shapes and colours into an indefinable something, supposed to be sublime in proportion to its vagueness. To no other poet has the outward form of things been so vividly present. Whatever the eye can see he has seen. His bewildering

wealth of metaphor is largely due to a visual memory which retained the shape of everything that had ever come within reach of his eye. The extent of this power and the use he made of it are so remarkable that a distinguished student of Hugo's work has lately devoted a whole book to them.<sup>1</sup> Another side, again, of Romanticism which he found congenial was its Byronic tendency to rebel against established authority. All genius begins with the instinctive assertion of liberty, though it often ends in a convinced acceptance of law. That second stage Hugo never reached. He passed from opposition to opposition. From a literary free-lance he went on to be a political and social rebel. The democrat who was in him almost from the first played a continually larger and larger part. Indeed, as we look back now, there is perhaps no single word that is the key to so much in his many-sided personality. He is a democrat, the voice and incarnation of a people, speaking to the people in the only two manners the people understand, at one moment as grandiose as a scene-painter, at another as simple as a child. He cannot think. The moment he aims at thought he becomes, not a child, as Goethe said of Byron, but a declaiming schoolboy. But he can feel. In that world he is at home. Whatever can be felt he feels as a child feels it, as bare humanity feels it. Here, above all, his noble universality comes out. His is always a human and popular voice, never the voice of a coterie. And that perhaps is the very last word; for it gives the

<sup>1</sup> *Le Sens de la Forme dans les Métaphores de Victor Hugo.* Par Édouard Huguet.



two sides of him. His is a popular voice, for evil and for good : for evil in its carelessness, its lack of humour and distinction, its incapacity for difficult thought, its loud and ridiculous vanity, its violence, its prejudice, its liability to cheat itself with windy and meaningless phrases : for good, in its breadth of utterance, in its tenderness of feeling, in its invincible faith in the primal relations of life, wife and husband, mother and son, the beauty of childhood, the dignity of age ; in its sure and unfailing instinct for the large universal things both of heart and head of which no questionings of philosophy will ever deprive the people.

There, I think, lies his surest hold on ultimate fame. He said of himself in his old age :

Mon cœur est sans frontière, et je n'ai pas d'endroit  
Où finisse l'amour des petits, et le droit  
Des faibles, et l'appui qu'on doit aux misérables ;<sup>1</sup>

and he spoke only the truth. There has never been a nobler voice of that human brotherliness which is the soul of all that is best in democracy. And it is that side of all that he was which those who have loved him best have wished to think of last and longest. So at least it seems to have been with the greatest and most generous of them all. Mr. Swinburne has found a thousand things to praise in his master ; but when it came to the very end and Victor Hugo was being carried to the grave, it was neither to the lord of language, nor to the interpreter of nature, nor even to the prophet of justice, that he paid the final tribute of his *In Time of Mourning* : it

<sup>1</sup> *Grand-père*, xv, ix. 189.

was to the poet whose finger had felt every beat of the heart of humanity, the giver and healer of human tears.

‘Return,’ we dare not as we fain  
Would cry from hearts that yearn :  
Love dares not bid our dead again  
Return.

O hearts that strain and burn  
As fires fast fettered burn and strain !  
Bow down, lie still, and learn.

The heart that healed all hearts of pain  
No funeral rites inurn :  
Its echoes, while the stars remain,  
Return.

LECONTE DE LISLE

## LECONTE DE LISLE

IN 1841 the rebel author of *Hernani* received the surrender of the last fortress of literary conservatism. With the submission of the Academy all serious resistance ceased, and he was universally recognised as the greatest of living French poets. No contemporary fame could compare with his, and he was in the way to become one of the accepted glories of France. But eleven years later a great event took place which, in more ways than one, coloured his whole remaining life. In the final result it certainly did no injury either to his poetry or to his fame, but its immediate effect was to make him a stranger to his country. With the establishment of the Second Empire Victor Hugo became an exile. A long line of illustrious examples of all ages and nations might be cited to prove that poets have commonly found the land of their exile a very fertile soil. *Facit indignatio versum* is an old and true story, and some of the finest passages of Dante and Byron were born of the injustice which made the one a stranger to Florence and the other to England. They, again, and others, have owed much of their poetic achievement to the unwelcome possession of an alien's leisure. The indignation may not be universal: but the leisure is; and the most submissive of exiles

will have ample time to pour out his regrets and prayers. Ovid would perhaps never have known how much he loved Rome, or Du Bellay and Charles d'Orléans how much they loved France, if they had never seen the sun rise over alien fields. In this, as in other matters, the best gifts of the gods may sometimes be given us against our will. And so it was with Hugo. The years he spent in the Channel Islands were the most fruitful of his life. But still, much as exile can give, there are some things it inevitably takes away. Poets are artists, and all artists love glory. The most honest of poets confessed that *monstrari digito præter-euntium* was no small part of the pleasure of life. Well, the passer-by at Rome cannot point you out to his friends if you are at Tomi, nor the Parisian if you are in Jersey. When Victor Hugo passed into exile he was necessarily to some extent forgotten, and a man as unlike him as it is possible for a man to be became the most conspicuous poet in France.

Leconte de Lisle was born in 1820 on the little island of Réunion, far away in the Indian Ocean. That is the first fact in his life and not the least important. The South Seas and the tropical sun had set an ineffaceable mark on him, and he never really became a European. But his life was nearly all spent at Paris, and he was only thirty-three when the publication of his *Poèmes Antiques* proved to France her possession of a new and original poet, and still under forty when his second volume made him in the absence of Hugo the visible head of the company of French poets. Still, the man of

the South never became really at home in the North, and the first contrast between Hugo and Leconte de Lisle is that between the inexhaustible energy of Europe and the apathy and indolence of the Southern Seas. No one ever believed more wholeheartedly and abundantly than Hugo in the hope and value of human action. No poetry that was ever written is more hopeless and faithless than that of Leconte de Lisle. The two most bracing things this world has known are the North Sea and the young French Revolution, and Hugo had drunk deeply of their double optimism. Leconte de Lisle sat dreaming all his life, an intellectual planter in a tropical garden, with the natural result that he could neither enjoy the life he knew nor believe in the possibility of any other. Hugo, again, as we have seen, was always, for evil and for good, a politician, a voice of the people, sounding loud in the ears of the people, catching up and glorifying the phrases of the people, easily moved like the people, and, like the people, easily satisfied and easily deceived, with all the popular childishness, shallowness, hopefulness, love. Nothing can be less like this than the poet of *Poèmes Antiques*. Leconte de Lisle ignored politics and disdained the people, living aloof in artistic and philosophic isolation, too much a thinker to be the victim of popular catchwords, too much a pessimist to share a people's hopes and loves. For Hugo the world is a thing of inexpressible beauty, but he can hardly stay to think of it as merely that: he must pass on from the beauty of the stage to the mighty issues, the warfare between the sublimest moral forces that

is for ever being fought out on it. Leconte de Lisle goes no further than the beauty of it: for him there is no further to go. He stares in indolent enjoyment at the exquisite spectacle and hardly knows whether the cup of his pleasure is made sweeter or more bitter by his conviction that its last drop is poison, and that the only end of all beauty is decay and nothingness. Then he is a scholar, and Hugo a sciolist; he is an artist and Hugo a moralist; he is a Pagan and Hugo a Christian or, what is equally un-pagan, an Anti-christian: Hugo is a genius and he a taker of pains: Hugo a man of infinite variety, mingling always the sublime and the ridiculous, and Leconte de Lisle the most monotonous of first-rate poets, always on a high level but always the same. The contrast then is as marked as possible: and at first sight the substitution of Leconte de Lisle for Hugo has an appearance of being a substitution of taste for genius, of form for power, of sameness for variety, of stillness and silence for sound and stir, of one who rarely left the established Alexandrine for one who wrote in a hundred metres, half of them his own invention, of one who saw life as a picture for one who saw it as action and energy; even, one might almost say, of a superior person for a human being.

Why, then, should we read Leconte de Lisle at all? Well, not only because 'it takes all sorts to make a world,' though that is a sound enough reason so far as it goes. All individuals would, no doubt, be too vast a material to be got into the world of human study: but all sorts, all classes with a real

difference between each other, the human mind may really attempt to know. And about the reality of the difference between the class of poet represented by Leconte de Lisle and any other class there is really no doubt at all. Then again genius, though a far greater thing than perfection, is not very appreciably rarer; and the flawless beauty of Leconte de Lisle rests and heals the ear after Hugo's storms and ardours as a still summer morning in the Bay of Naples soothes the traveller who has been tossed in the Gulf of Lions. The poetry which begins and ends in rest will never be as great as the poetry of rest following upon action, and the almost exclusive quietness of Leconte de Lisle is a weakness just because it is almost exclusive. But the painting of pictures, though not the main business of poets, has been in all ages one of their special delights, and a man may be forgiven for neglecting the main business of life when he enjoys himself so beautifully as Leconte de Lisle. And, after all, it may be that the highest function of all the arts is the awakening of our sensibilities: and who has awakened us more to one side of Nature, and even of Man, than the poet of *Midi*? We read a few of his poems and we get a conception of Nature which is not quite the same as any we get elsewhere, a Being suave and adorable, yet silent, aloof, inevitable, and indifferent, irresistible in beauty, impenetrable to prayer. And the verse fits the conception. The Alexandrine has never been more serenely smooth: it glides on in gracious indolence like a river in June. The pomp of dawn and sunset, often as poets have touched them, have



never been more magnificently rendered than in such passages as that in which the old poet Valmiki climbs the mountain to look once more before he dies on the most splendid of Nature's spectacles, the birth of a new day.

Il contemple, immobile, une dernière fois,  
Les fleuves, les cités, et les lacs et les bois,  
Les monts, piliers du ciel, et l'Océan sonore  
D'où s'élance et fleurit le Rosier de l'Aurore.

L'homme impassible voit cela, silencieux.

La lumière sacrée envahit terre et cieux ;  
Du zénith au brin d'herbe et du gouffre à la nue,  
Elle vole, palpète, et nage et s'insinue,  
Dorant d'un seul baiser clair, subtil, frais et doux,  
Les oiseaux dans la mousse, et, sous les noirs bambous,  
Les éléphants pensifs qui font frémir leurs rides  
Au vol strident et vif des vertes cantharides,  
Les radjahs et les chiens, Richis et Parias,  
Et l'insecte invisible et les Himalayas.  
Un rire éblouissant illumine le monde.  
L'arome de la Vie inépuisable inonde  
L'immensité du rêve énergétique où Brahma  
Se vit, se reconnut, resplendit et s'aima.

Where shall we find a dozen lines making articulate so many of the sensations which pass vaguely through us as we watch a sunrise? Everything is either said or suggested: the silence which is so natural and seems so strange: the insinuating, stealthily pervading, quality: the feeling as of a glorious universality of sacred light and life; the palpitating heart of expectation, and the smiling beauty of the uncovered world which rewards it; the haunting sense of a dreamland which cannot reveal more than half its secret and yet can suggest that the secret is divine. A man who can put this, and so much more, into verse which has a liquid suavity

of flow as entirely without break or edge or pause, as smoothly continuous, as the very coming of the dawn itself, is both a great artist and a great poet. And note two other things in this passage which are characteristic of Leconte de Lisle. It is natural, no doubt, that in this poem both the life and the landscape should be Oriental. But that is the case not only here but almost everywhere in his work. At least, if not Oriental, they are in any case not European. No European poet, least of all a Frenchman, has so habitually thought of man and nature from a point of view which, whatever it is, is not that of Europe, as Leconte de Lisle. And then there is the pantheism of the last lines. Pantheism where it is consistent and serious has always ended in a sterile pessimism. Wordsworth has his pantheistic moments, or his moments of pantheistic expression, but he is essentially a transcendentalist. And Shelley, for all the pantheism of *Adonais*, had as firm a conviction as any man who ever lived of the difference between good and evil, and as firm a faith in the ultimate victory of good and annihilation of evil. But Pantheism, for which all diversities are but aspects of a single unity, all evil good, and all good evil, and the Divine equally material and spiritual, a mere august name for the whole, Pantheism invariably destroys all the springs of hope and with them all the springs of activity. And it is this most dreary of creeds which possessed Leconte de Lisle and passed with fatal ease from the pictorial universality of the lines just quoted to the philosophic nihilism of *La Vision de Brahma*, where the only answer to be obtained from the

ultimate Being, 'Celui que nul n'a vu, l'Âme des âmes,' is that all, not only hope but even life itself, is nothing but the dream of an eternal illusion.

Toute chose depuis fermente, vit, s'achève :  
 Mais rien n'a de substance et de réalité,  
 Rien n'est vrai que l'unique et morne Éternité :  
 O Brahma ! toute chose est le rêve d'un rêve.

La Mâyâ dans mon sein bouillonne en fusion,  
 Dans son prisme changeant je vois tout apparaître :  
 Car ma seule Inertie est la source de l'Être :  
 La matrice du monde est mon Illusion.

C'est Elle qui s'incarne en ses formes diverses,  
 Esprits et corps, ciel pur, monts et flots orageux,  
 Et qui mêle, toujours impassible en ses jeux,  
 Aux sereines vertus les passions perverses.

It might be objected that this is intended not as the poet's view, but that of the Oriental with whom his poem deals. But the objection fails: for, whether he speaks in his own person or that of another, the view taken by Leconte de Lisle of these ultimate questions is always substantially the same. No one has given it a more beautiful shape than he gave it, in such pieces as *Dies Irae*, where it does not always seem to go far beyond such pessimism as that of Matthew Arnold, or *L'Orbe d'Or*, or the wonderful *Illusion Suprême*, where all the beauty of verse and fancy only heighten the gloom of what is in essence a cult of non-being, a creed of Nirvana and nothingness. The first of these poems is the lament of humanity looking back from the weary hopelessness of to-day to the 'freshness of the early world' and the life of earth's 'vigorous primitive sons.' It is one of the most perfect things left by this master of perfection.

Il est un jour, une heure, où dans le chemin rude,  
Courbé sous le fardeau des ans multipliés,  
L'Esprit humain s'arrête, et, pris de lassitude,  
Se retourne pensif vers les jours oubliés.

La vie a fatigué son attente inféconde ;  
Désabusé du Dieu qui ne doit point venir,  
Il sent renaître en lui la jeunesse du monde ;  
Il écoute ta voix, ô sacré souvenir !

Les astres qu'il aima d'un rayon pacifique  
Argentent dans la nuit les bois mystérieux,  
Et la sainte montagne et la vallée antique  
Où sous les noirs palmiers dormaient ses premiers Dieux.

Il voit la terre libre, et les verdeurs sauvages  
Flotter comme un encens sur les fleuves sacrés,  
Et les bleus Océans, chantant sur leurs rivages,  
Vers l'inconnu divin rouler immesurés.

De la hauteur des monts, berceaux des races pures  
Au murmure des flots, au bruit des dômes verts,  
Il écoute grandir, vierge encor de souillures,  
La jeune Humanité sur le jeune Univers.

Bienheureux ! Il croyait la terre impérissable,  
Il entendait parler au prochain firmament,  
Il n'avait point taché sa robe irréprochable :  
Dans la beauté du monde il vivait fortement.

. . . . .  
Oh ! la tente au désert et sur les monts sublimes,  
Les grandes visions sous les cèdres pensifs,  
Et la Liberté vierge et ses cris magnanimes  
Et le débordement des transports primitifs !

L'angoisse du désir vainement nous convie ;  
Au livre originel qui lira désormais ?  
L'homme a perdu le sens des paroles de la vie,  
L'esprit se tait, la lettre est morte pour jamais.

It is curious to notice that, in the volume of poems issued by Matthew Arnold in 1852, just before the appearance of *Poèmes Antiques*, there are two stanzas which are strangely like these last :

Who can see the green earth any more  
 As she was by the sources of Time?  
 Who imagines her fields as they lay  
 In the sunshine, unworn by the plough?  
 Who thinks as they thought,  
 The tribes who then roamed on her breast,  
 Her vigorous, primitive sons?

What girl  
 Now reads in her bosom as clear  
 As Rebekah read, when she sate  
 At eve by the palm-shaded well?  
 Who guards in her breast  
 As deep, as pellucid a spring  
 Of feeling, as tranquil, as sure?

But the main point of *The Future* is not that of Leconte de Lisle in *Dies Irae*. Indeed what follows the stanzas quoted resembles rather another of Arnold's poems, *Obermann Once More*. All is dead: the spirit of the East sleeps in the ashes of her gods: Greece is silent: the cry of the Nazarene has been heard for the last time. Only Arnold, after the famous picture of the Roman world dying because 'its heart was stone And so it could not thrive,' and then that of the world of mediæval Christianity passing in its turn:

Its frame yet stood without a breach  
 When blood and warmth were fled;  
 And still it spake its wonted speech—  
 But every word was dead:—

Arnold, after this, goes on to declare his faith in a new birth, and Obermann's last word is of hope, of the 'world's great order' dawning anew, 'divinelier imaged, clearer seen.'

One common wave of thought and joy  
 Lifting mankind again.

But Pantheism does not know the way to such hopes, which are transcendental things, things of the spirit. It could only end its beautiful lament in a call to Nature, from whom no answer is either expected or received.

Soupirs majestueux des ondes apaisées,  
Murmures plus profonds en nos cœurs soucieux !  
Répandez, ô forêts, vos urnes de rosées !  
Ruisselle en nous, silence étincelant des cieux !

Consolez-nous enfin des espérances vaines ;  
La route infructueuse a blessé nos pieds nus.  
Du sommet des grands caps, loin des rumeurs humaines  
O vents ! emportez-nous vers les Dieux inconnus !

Mais si rien ne répond dans l'immense étendue  
Que le stérile écho de l'éternel désir,  
Adieu, déserts, où l'âme ouvre une aile éperdue !  
Adieu, songe sublime, impossible à saisir !

Et toi, divine Mort, où tout rentre et s'efface,  
Accueille tes enfants dans ton sein étoilé ;  
Affranchis-nous du temps, du nombre et de l'espace,  
Et rends-nous le repos que la vie a troublé !

In the other two poems, *L'Illusion Suprême* and *L'Orbe d'Or*, he is returning not to the childhood of humanity but to his own. We get a series of wonderful stanzas recalling the life and landscape of the southern island where he first saw the light.

Sous les lilas géants où vibrent les abeilles,  
Voici le vert coteau, la tranquille maison,  
Les grappes de letchis et les mangues vermeilles  
Et l'oiseau bleu dans le maïs en floraison ;

Aux pentes des pitons, parmi les cannes grêles  
Dont la peau d'ambre mûr s'ouvre au jus attiédi,  
Le vol vif et strident des roses sauterelles  
Qui s'enivrent de la lumière de midi :

Les cascades, en un brouillard de pierreries,  
Versant du haut des rocs leur neige en éventail ;  
Et la brise embaumée autour des suereries,  
Et le fourmillement des Hindous au travail :

Le ciel vaste où le mont dentelé se profile,  
Lorsque ta pourpre, ô soir, le revêt tout entier !  
Et le chant triste et doux des Bandes à la file  
Qui s'en viennent des hauts et s'en vont au quartier.

Puis tout s'apaise et dort. La lune se balance,  
Perle éclatante, au fond des cieux d'astres emplis :  
La mer soupire et semble accroître le silence  
Et berce le reflet des mondes dans ses plis.

Who has given more of its own beauty to that picture of a million worlds gently rocking in the bosom of the waves! But all these memories, and all their loveliness, only end in Tennyson's question and receive an answer very different from Tennyson's, or, as we have seen, from Hugo's :

Ah ! tout cela, jeunesse, amour, joie, et pensée,  
Chants de la mer et des forêts, souffles du ciel  
Emportant à plein vol l'Espérance insensée,  
Qu'est-ce que tout cela, qui n'est pas éternel ?

Soit ! la poussière humaine en proie au temps rapide,  
Ses voluptés, ses pleurs, ses combats, ses remords,  
Les Dieux qu'elle a conçus et l'univers stupide,  
Ne valent pas la paix impassible des morts.

The whole poem is a thing of astonishing beauty, and so is the very similar *Orbe d'Or*. Nothing is, after all, so living as beauty : and where it is present as it is here negation itself becomes a positive thing, and vanity of vanities forgets and denies itself in the promise of life which the music of its own voice conveys. But note a peculiar effect the message has

upon the manner of its utterance. Melancholy is the most monotonous thing in the whole world. And, fine as is much of the verse of Leconte de Lisle, it cannot be denied that it is monotonous. Either he could not help it, or he felt that variety would be out of keeping with his thought. In any case there it is. For instance, in all the verses I have hitherto quoted there is scarcely a single instance of a considerable pause anywhere except at the end of a line; and there is not one *enjambement* of the stronger sort so common in La Fontaine and Hugo where no pause at all occurs at the end of a line and a full stop with a complete break in the sense occurs in the course of the next. Leconte de Lisle's even regularity rarely attempts such effects as those by which La Fontaine secures his air of colloquial ease:

Ta colère et tes dents  
Ne me nuiront jamais;

or those by which Chénier points his eloquence:

Et de ces grands tombeaux, la belle liberté  
Altière, étincelante, armée  
Sort;

or those with which Hugo so often secures attention for his invective, holding his victim as it were suspended in mid-air before he proceeds to execution:

Pas un de ces Césars à l'allure guerrière  
Ne regardait cet homme.

Too sombre and dignified to rival La Fontaine, too undramatic to follow Hugo, Leconte de Lisle has little use for these artifices. His favourite



forms, the idyll and the elegy, hardly call for them. He is primarily a descriptive and meditative poet: and his meditations very commonly take the form of laments: and something of monotony is almost of the essence of elegy. Those who 'sing a melancholy strain' have always sung 'as if their song could have no ending,' just as in all ages of the world it has been in the unchanging, unceasing murmur of the waves on the seashore, and not in the note of the bird which sings and is silent, that poets have found the voice of a grief in which nature sympathises with man.

That, then, is the dominant note of Leconte de Lisle, a kind of intellectual and artistic quietism. He seems always to be waiting and receiving, never creating or acting. In his hands Nature herself becomes passive and quiescent: so that, in a whole volume of poems full of Nature, I noticed only one mention of storm or strong wind. But within these peculiar limits, he has achieved some astonishing results. His successes lie in three fields: in the elegiac utterances of which I have been speaking, in his idylls of Greek or Eastern life, in his marvellous pictures of Nature in repose. It is these last by which he is best known. Perhaps his two most famous poems are *Midi* and *Le Sommeil du Condor*, and it is characteristic of him that one of the two is the silence of noon, and the other the sleep of night. Often as they have been quoted, no study of Leconte de Lisle can omit them. They are his most absolutely perfect work. His imagination never takes such complete possession of its subject

as it does here, and his art never seconds it with more consummate craftsmanship. It is always the artist's difficulty, sometimes his agony, that his work does not realise his conception. He can never say 'this is finished' because he is always conscious of something wanting. Even we, who merely see or read his work, can often detect inequalities, things we wish away, things we find lacking. There is one image in a poem, one word in a sonnet which just prevents our using the word 'perfect.' But here artist and critic must alike feel that the thing the poet set out to do has been done. There are many greater things in literature than *Le Sommeil du Condor*, but a thing more perfect it would not be easy to find anywhere.

Par delà l'escalier des roides Cordillères,  
Par delà les brouillards hantés des aigles noirs  
Plus haut que les sommets creusés en entonnoirs  
Où bout le flux sanglant des laves familières,  
L'envergure pendante et rouge par endroits,  
Le vaste Oiseau, tout plein d'une morne indolence,  
Regarde l'Amérique et l'espace en silence,  
Et le sombre soleil qui meurt dans ses yeux froids.  
La nuit roule de l'Est, où les pampas sauvages  
Sous les monts étagés s'élargissent sans fin :  
Elle endort le Chili, les villes, les rivages,  
Et la mer Pacifique et l'horizon divin ;  
Du continent muet elle s'est emparée :  
Des sables aux coteaux, des gorges aux versants,  
De cime en cime, elle enfle en tourbillons croissants,  
Le lourd débordement de sa haute marée.  
Lui, comme un spectre, seul, au front du pic altier,  
Baigné d'une lueur qui saigne sur la neige,  
Il attend cette mer sinistre qui l'assiège :  
Elle arrive, déferle, et le couvre en entier.  
Dans l'abîme sans fond la Croix australe allume  
Sur les côtes du ciel son phare constellé.  
Il râle de plaisir, il agite sa plume,  
Il érige son cou musculeux et pelé,

Il s'enlève en fouettant l'âpre neige des Andes,  
 Dans un cri rauque il monte où n'atteint pas le vent,  
 Et, loin du globe noir, loin de l'astre vivant,  
 Il dort dans l'air glacé, les ailes toutes grandes.

What an air of vastness there is about it all! Everything is large and strange and remote; the Andes, and the Pacific, and the Southern Cross, and this great bird poised between earth and heaven. And yet with what serene assurance the poet takes us there! We rise on the wings of his imagination, our voyage is one of unruffled ease, effortless and sure of its goal, and when we come back we have seen what he saw, felt what he felt, and realised the sensation of the grandiosity of Nature, as the South knows it and as Europe can never know. With Nature on this scale one cannot be intimate as one may be with a robin or a violet: but in these august heights and depths it is not intimacy of detail that we ask of a poet: it is the visible impression of a great experience: and Leconte de Lisle in his measure is as assuredly a man who has come from a strange country as Dante is the man who has been in Heaven and Hell.

There are a whole series of these poems of almost equal power. *La Panthère Noire*, *Le Jaguar*, *L'Albatros*, and others; neither the landscape nor the animals are ever European. Europe seems to have been too noisy, too ordinary, too colourless, for this aristocrat of the intellect: and with scarcely an exception, he turns his eyes far south or far east in weariness or disdain. There, and there only, will his imagination exert itself, and all his poems are sown with pictures of a Nature more splendid and

more terrible than our own. The trees he loves are trees which never grew in Ronsard's *Forêt de Gastine*: the fountain of his memory is not adorned by the wild flowers of Europe: it is *La Fontaine aux Lianes*. And these memories of his youth are the only things that win from him a touch of tenderness unknown elsewhere to his aloof and sculpturesque severity.

Comme le flot des mers ondulant vers les plages,  
O bois, vous déroulez, pleins d'arome et de nids,  
Dans l'air splendide et bleu, vos houles de feuillages;  
Vous êtes toujours vieux et toujours rajeunis.

Le temps a respecté, rois aux longues années,  
Vos grands fronts couronnés de lianes d'argent;  
Nul pied ne foulera vos feuilles non fânées:  
Vous verrez passer l'homme et le monde changeant.

Vous inclinez d'en haut, au penchant des ravines,  
Vos rameaux lents et lourds qu'ont brûlés les éclairs;  
Qu'il est doux le repos de vos ombres divines,  
Aux soupirs de la brise, aux chansons des flots clairs!

Le soleil de midi fait palpiter vos sèves;  
Vous siégez, revêtus de sa pourpre, et sans voix;  
Mais la nuit, épanchant la rosée et les rêves,  
Apaise et fait chanter les âmes et les bois:

O bois natals, j'errais sous vos larges ramures,  
L'aube aux flancs noirs des monts marchait d'un pied  
vermeil:

La mer avec lenteur éveillait ses murmures,  
Et de tout œil vivant fuyait le doux sommeil.

Et le ciel descendait dans les claires rosées  
Dont la montagne bleue au loin étincelait;  
Un mol encens fumait des plantes arrosées  
Vers la sainte nature à qui mon cœur parlait.

The strong point, it will be seen, is, as usual, not exactly originality: it lies in the liquid ease of the verse, in the felicitous choice of detail, in the *mol*

*encens* of beauty that rises from the whole. A more original thing is the great picture of a southern dawn, *L'Aurore* :

La nue était d'or pâle ; et, d'un ciel doux et frais,  
 Sur les jaunes bambous, sur les rosiers épais,  
 Sur la mousse gonflée et les safrans sauvages,  
 D'étroits rayons filtraient à travers les feuillages.  
 Un arôme léger d'herbe et de fleurs montait ;  
 Un murmure infini dans l'air subtil flottait :  
 Chœur des Esprits cachés, âmes de toutes choses,  
 Qui font chanter la source et s'entr'ouvrir les roses ;  
 Dieux jeunes, bienveillants, rois d'un monde enchanté  
 Où s'unissent d'amour la force et la beauté.  
 La brume bleue errait aux pentes des ravines ;  
 Et, de leurs becs pourprés lissant leurs ailes fines,  
 Les blonds sénégalis, dans les gérofliers  
 D'une eau pure trempés, s'éveillaient par milliers.  
 La mer était sereine, et sur la houle claire  
 L'aube vive dardait sa flèche de lumière ;  
 La montagne nageait dans l'air éblouissant  
 Avec ses verts coteaux de maïs mûrissant,  
 Et ses cônes d'azur, et ses forêts bercées  
 Aux brises du matin sur les flots élancées ;  
 Et l'île, rougissante et lasse du sommeil,  
 Chantait et souriait aux baisers du soleil.

O jeunesse sacrée, irréparable joie,  
 Félicité perdue, où l'âme en pleurs se noie !  
 O lumière, ô fraîcheur des monts calmes et bleus,  
 Des coteaux et des bois feuillages onduleux,  
 Aube d'un jour divin, chants des mers fortunées,  
 Florissante vigueur de mes belles années . . .  
 Vous vivez, vous chantez, vous palpitez encor,  
 Saintes réalités, dans vos horizons d'or !  
 Mais, ô nature, ô ciel, flots sacrés, monts sublimes,  
 Bois dont les vents amis font murmurer les cimes,  
 Formes de l'idéal, magnifiques aux yeux,  
 Vous avez disparu de mon cœur oublieux !  
 Et voici que, lassé de voluptés amères,  
 Haletant du désir de mes mille chimères,  
 Hélas ! j'ai désappris les hymnes d'autrefois  
 Et que mes dieux trahis n'entendent plus ma voix.

There is a touch of spirit in this, very rare in Leconte de Lisle, a half faith in something that transcends matter. But what pessimism, what a sense of loss, exhaustion, failure, hopelessness! It is curious to compare it with such a thing as Hugo's dawn in Eden, already quoted, where the taste is far less sure, even the verse less impeccable, but all defects are redeemed or forgotten in a blaze of splendour, a daring and dazzling exuberance, an overflow of ardent emotion which sweeps all before it, because we hear in it the voice of genius, which is the same thing as saying that we forget the poet in something greater than any individual or even any art; and, passing behind him, seem to ourselves to be catching some fragmentary impression of the energy and the joy of which the visible universe is all that could take shape for human eyes.

High utterances of that kind were out of the reach of Leconte de Lisle. But if the prophet's flights are beyond the artist, there are things in which art has its revenges. The last thing prophets attain is self-control: and the fine reserve of such poems as *Juin* and *Midi*, silent and self-forgetting in the presence of Nature, is a secret almost entirely unguessed by the magnificent egotism of Hugo:

Midi, roi des étés, épandu sur la plaine,  
Tombe en nappes d'argent des hauteurs du ciel bleu.  
Tout se tait. L'air flamboie et brûle sans haleine;  
La terre est assoupie en sa robe de feu.

L'étendue est immense, et les champs n'ont point d'ombre,  
Et la source est tarie où buvaient les troupeaux;  
La lointaine forêt, dont la lisière est sombre,  
Dort là-bas, immobile, en un pesant repos.

Seuls, les grands blés mûris, tels qu'une mer dorée,  
 Se déroulent au loin, dédaigneux du sommeil ;  
 Pacifiques enfants de la terre sacrée,  
 Ils épuisent sans peur la coupe du soleil.

Parfois, comme un soupir de leur âme brûlante,  
 Du sein des épis lourds qui murmurent entre eux,  
 Une ondulation majestueuse et lente  
 S'éveille, et va mourir à l'horizon poudreux.

Non loin, quelques bœufs blancs, couchés parmi les herbes,  
 Bavent avec lenteur sur leurs fanons épais,  
 Et suivent de leurs yeux languissants et superbes  
 Le songe intérieur qu'ils n'achèvent jamais.

Homme, si, le cœur plein de joie ou d'amertume,  
 Tu passais vers midi dans les champs radieux,  
 Fuis ! la nature est vide et le soleil consume ;  
 Rien n'est vivant ici, rien n'est triste ou joyeux.

Mais si, désabusé des larmes et du rire,  
 Altéré de l'oubli de ce monde agité,  
 Tu veux, ne sachant plus pardonner ou maudire,  
 Goûter une suprême et morne volupté,

Viens ! Le soleil te parle en paroles sublimes ;  
 Dans sa flamme implacable absorbe-toi sans fin ;  
 Et retourne à pas lents vers les cités infimes,  
 Le cœur trempé sept fois dans le néant divin.

Poetry has very few pure landscapes of finer quality than this. The drowsy earth, the motionless wood, the corn that disdains sleep and drinks its fill of the sun's cup of fire, the solemn ripple of air that moves across its surface from time to time, the couchant oxen with their languid eyes full of a dream that never gets accomplished, never resents its own beautiful futility ; was there ever quite such a perfect picture of Summer ? Could even Keats add anything to it except his touch of 'high romance' ? And for once we are in Europe, with our own familiar cornfields and cattle ! Here at

any rate is a poem which must be read as long as French is read at all. It comes nearer than anything else written by Leconte de Lisle to the immortal and impeccable perfection of the sonnets of his great pupil Heredia.

This astonishing piece has two companions which only just fail to be its equals—*Juin* and *Nox*. *Juin* is a picture of what comes before the burning silences of midsummer, of the delicious time when

La terre rit, confuse, à la vierge pareille  
Qui d'un premier baiser frémit languissamment,  
Et son œil est humide, et sa joue est vermeille,  
Et son âme a senti les lèvres de l'amant.

Even there the invariable quietism of the poet gives as little as possible of the sound and stir of Nature that come before the great heat. And so with *Nox*, where the contrast with *Midî* is one only of light and darkness: there is no action in either: alike in both the note is that of repose.

Sur la pente des monts les brises apaisées  
Inclinent au sommeil les arbres onduleux ;  
L'oiseau silencieux s'endort dans les rosées,  
Et l'étoile a doré l'écume des flots bleus.

Au contour des ravins, sur les hauteurs sauvages,  
Une molle vapeur efface les chemins ;  
La lune tristement baigne les noirs feuillages ;  
L'oreille n'entend plus les murmures humains.

Mais sur le sable au loin chante la mer divine,  
Et des hautes forêts gémit la grande voix,  
Et l'air sonore, aux cieux que la nuit illumine,  
Porte le chant des mers et le soupir des bois.

Montez, saintes rumeurs, paroles surhumaines,  
Entretien lent et doux de la terre et du ciel !  
Montez, et demandez aux étoiles sereines  
S'il est pour les atteindre un chemin éternel.



O mers, ô bois songeurs, voix pieuses du monde,  
 Vous m'avez répondu durant mes jours mauvais ;  
 Vous avez apaisé ma tristesse inféconde,  
 Et dans mon cœur aussi vous chantez à jamais !

Here, once more, one seems to see something of what English readers know in the poet's contemporary, Matthew Arnold :

And a look of passionate desire  
 O'er the sea and to the stars I send :  
 'Ye who from my childhood up have calmed me,  
 Calm me, ah, compose me to the end !

Ah, once more,' I cried, 'ye stars, ye waters,  
 On my heart your mighty charm renew :  
 Still, still let me, as I gaze upon you,  
 Feel my soul becoming vast like you !'

On the whole there is no English lyric and elegiac poet who comes so near to being a parallel to Leconte de Lisle as Matthew Arnold. The pessimism of the French poet goes indeed far beyond anything that ever became possible, even in his darkest moments, to Thomas Arnold's son. And Matthew Arnold is everywhere profoundly and convincingly spiritualist in his interpretation of the Universe. If he had not been his father's son he would still have been Wordsworth's disciple. He is even more than spiritualist. He is Christian by temperament, by association, by everything but formal creed : nothing in the world interests him so much as religion, and nothing in religion approaches the interest of Christianity. But, these differences apart, the two men have much in common. All poets are impatient of the triviality which dominates the lives they see about them. But Arnold and Leconte de Lisle had exactly the same sort of

disdain, the disdain of the scholar and the humanist for a world that is proud of its activity, and never asks itself what is likely to come of it all. We know the complaint Matthew Arnold poured forth all his life in prose and verse, by speech and by letter :

For most men in a brazen prison live,  
Where, in the sun's hot eye,  
With heads bent o'er their toil, they languidly  
Their lives to some unmeaning task-work give,  
Dreaming of nought beyond their prison-wall.  
And as, year after year,  
Fresh products of their barren labour fall  
From their tired hands, and rest  
Never yet comes more near,  
Gloom settles slowly down over their breast ;  
And while they try to stem  
The waves of mournful thought by which they are prest,  
Death in their prison reaches them,  
Unfreed, having seen nothing, still unblest.

Leconte de Lisle's judgment of his contemporaries is the same in substance : but how different in spirit,—with all the difference between the sadness of pity and the bitterness of hate !

*Vous vivez lâchement, sans rêve, sans dessein,  
Plus vieux, plus décrépits que la terre inféconde,  
Châtrés dès le berceau par le siècle assassin  
De toute passion vigoureuse et profonde.*

*Votre cervelle est vide autant que votre sein,  
Et vous avez souillé ce misérable monde  
D'un sang si corrompu, d'un souffle si malsain,  
Que la mort germe seule en cette boue immonde.*

*Hommes, tueurs de Dieux, les temps ne sont pas loin  
Où, sur un grand tas d'or vautrés dans quelque coin,  
Ayant rongé le sol nourricier jusqu'aux roches,*

*Ne sachant faire rien ni des jours ni des nuits,  
Noyés dans le néant des suprêmes ennuis,  
Vous mourrez bêtement en emplissant vos poches.*

And so they both turn away, and take refuge in their own life of high thoughts and studies, and in their own ideal. But Arnold's ideal, even at its severest, is that of the

Stoic souls who weigh  
Life well, and find it wanting, nor deplore ;  
But in disdainful silence turn away,  
Stand mute, self-centred, stern, and dream no more !

This is a calm renunciation of the life of the crowd, so futile and so meaningless. But it does not satisfy Leconte de Lisle. There is a note of something more like loathing and cursing in his rejection of the world and what it has to give :

Tel qu'un morne animal, meurtri, plein de poussière,  
La chaîne au cou, hurlant au chaud soleil d'été,  
Promène qui voudra son cœur ensanglanté  
Sur ton pavé cynique, ô plèbe carnassière !  
Pour mettre un feu stérile en ton œil hébété,  
Pour mendier ton rire ou ta pitié grossière,  
Déchire qui voudra la robe de lumière  
De la pudeur divine et de la volupté.  
Dans mon orgueil muet, dans ma tombe sans gloire,  
Dussé-je m'engloutir pour l'éternité noire,  
Je ne te vendrai pas mon ivresse ou mon mal,  
Je ne livrerai pas ma vie à tes huées,  
Je ne danserai pas sur ton tréteau banal  
Avec tes histrions et tes prostituées.

His hatred of the world is, of course, born in part of the fact that he has nowhere else to go to. Arnold finds no more peace in the world than he.

I, on men's impious uproar hurled,  
Think often, as I hear them rave,  
That peace has left the upper world  
And now keeps only in the grave.

But he has his escape :

Yet here is peace for ever new !

Calm soul of all things ! make it mine  
 To feel, amid the city's jar,  
 That there abides a peace of thine  
 Man did not make and cannot mar :

The will to neither strive nor cry,  
 The power to feel with others give !  
 Calm, calm me more ! nor let me die  
 Before I have begun to live.

But for that you must desire the gift of feeling with others, and you must believe that there is a 'soul of all things.' That is where Leconte de Lisle failed. His escape could only be into isolation—

Tel parmi les sanglots, les rires et les haines,  
 Heureux qui porte en soi, d'indifférence rempli,  
 Un impassible cœur sourd aux rumeurs humaines,  
 Un gouffre inviolé de silence et d'oubli !—

or into absolute negation, the final nadir of materialism, as in his *Solvet Saeclum* :

Tu te tairas, ô voix sinistre des vivants !

Blasphèmes furieux qui roulez par les vents,  
 Cris d'épouvante, cris de haine, cris de rage,  
 Effroyables clameurs de l'éternel naufrage,  
 Tourments, crimes, remords, sanglots désespérés,  
 Esprit et chair de l'homme, un jour vous vous tairez !  
 Tout se taira, dieux, rois, forçats et foules viles,  
 Le rauque grondement des bagnes et des villes,  
 Les bêtes des forêts, des monts et de la mer,  
 Ce qui vole et bondit et rampe en cet enfer,  
 Tout ce qui tremble et fuit, tout ce qui tue et mange,  
 Depuis le ver de terre écrasé dans la fange  
 Jusqu' à la foudre errant dans l'épaisseur des nuits !  
 D'un seul coup la nature interrompra ses bruits.  
 Et ce ne sera point, sous les cieus magnifiques,  
 Le bonheur reconquis des paradis antiques,  
 Ni l'entretien d'Adam et d'Ève sur les fleurs,  
 Ni le divin sommeil après tant de douleurs ;  
 Ce sera quand le Globe et tout ce qui l'habite,  
 Bloc stérile arraché de son immense orbite,

Stupide, aveugle, plein d'un dernier hurlement,  
 Plus lourd, plus éperdu de moment en moment,  
 Contre quelque univers immobile en sa force  
 Défoncera sa vieille et misérable écorce,  
 Et, laissant ruisseler, par mille trous béants,  
 Sa flamme intérieure avec ses océans,  
 Ira fertiliser de ses restes immondes  
 Les sillons de l'espace où fermentent les mondes.

But poetry, after all, can hardly live in an atmosphere of mere negation: and it is pleasant to turn from all this to another side of the poet's work in which, again like Arnold, his fine culture found its utterance, not in scorn of the present, no longer in anything negative at all, but in the nobly positive task of recreating for his own day what he knew and loved so well, the serene and beautiful life of the ancients. For Leconte de Lisle the classical idyll is, like his Southern and Eastern landscapes, a way of escape from Europe and the nineteenth century. And here he is a master on his own ground, and, if he had only known it, his most effective criticism of the life of his contemporaries is not to be found in any of his attacks on them, but in those returns to the antique, in which he indirectly shows them a simpler and more excellent way. Perhaps there is nothing so Greek in modern literature except the *Hellenics* of Landor. Leconte de Lisle, like Landor, lived much of his life with the Greeks and Romans, and did not merely talk about them like Victor Hugo, for whom their great names were poetical ammunition but little more. Hugo, indeed, was always making blunders in these matters which were quite impossible to the translator of Aeschylus. And he had none of the scholarly detachment which makes possible such

things as Leconte de Lisle's beautiful *Glaucé* and still more beautiful *Khirôn*, which have the still reserve of fine sculpture. It is a pity, perhaps, that he shared enough of the scholarly affectation of his day to induce him to give the Centaur's name that barbarous shape, and to forget that odd spellings can prevent a word from being French but can never make it Greek. That, however, is a small matter, and as long as the human ear delights in the sound of beautiful verse, and the human mind wistfully recalls its debt to Greece, Leconte de Lisle's Greek idylls can never want readers. *Glaucé* is the familiar tale of the sea nymph who prays the shepherd to share her immortality: but he is the child of Nature and the servant of Pan and Cybele and has escaped all the darts of Eros.

O Nymphe ! s'il est vrai qu'Éros, le jeune Archer,  
 Ait su d'un trait doré te suivre et te toucher ;  
 S'il est vrai que des pleurs, blanche fille de l'onde,  
 Étincellent pour moi dans ta paupière blonde ;  
 Que nul Dieu de la mer n'est ton amant heureux,  
 Que mon image flotte en ton rêve amoureux,  
 Et que moi seul enfin je flétrisse ta joue ;  
 Je te plains ! Mais Éros de notre cœur se joue,  
 Et le trait qui perça ton beau sein, ô Glaucé,  
 Sans même m'effleurer dans les airs a glissé.  
 Je te plains ! Ne crois pas, ô ma pâle Déesse,  
 Que mon cœur soit de marbre et sourd à ta détresse,  
 Mais je ne puis t'aimer : Kybèle a pris mes jours,  
 Et rien ne brisera nos sublimes amours.  
 Va donc ! et, tarissant tes larmes soucieuses,  
 Danse bientôt, légère, à tes noces joyeuses ! . . .  
 Nulle vierge, mortelle ou Déesse, au beau corps,  
 N'a vos soupirs divins ni vos profonds accords,  
 O bois mystérieux, temples aux frais portiques,  
 Chênes qui m'abritez de rameaux prophétiques,  
 Dont l'atome et les chants vont où s'en vont mes pas,  
 Vous qu'on aime sans cesse et qui ne trompez pas,

Qui d'un calme si pur enveloppez mon-êtré  
 Que j'oublie et la mort et l'heure où j'ai dû naître !  
 O nature, ô Kybèle, ô sereines forêts,  
 Gardez-moi le repos de vos asiles frais ;  
 Sous le platane épais d'où le silence tombe,  
 Auprès de mon berceau creusez mon humble tombe,  
 Que Pan confonde un jour aux lieux où je vous vois  
 Mes suprêmes soupirs avec vos douces voix,  
 Et que mon ombre encore, à nos amours fidèle,  
 Passe dans vos rameaux comme un battement d'aile !

One might be looking, as one reads these lines, at such a picture as the 'Arcadian Shepherds moving their flocks by night' of that fine and most Hellenic artist, Edward Calvert. There is, indeed, an added something of sympathetic tenderness, rarer among the Greeks than in a world which cannot escape from Christianity: and the poem is rather Alexandrian than Attic, as modern imitations of Greek generally are: but, for the rest, it is Greek in its simplicity, in its atmosphere, as it were, of the primary emotions, in its beautiful directness, ease, and distinction. Leconte de Lisle has left a good many of these idylls; *Kybèle*, and *Niobe*, and *L'Enfance d'Héraklès*, and others: and there are also some beautiful Eastern idylls like *Çunacépa*: but the finest of all is *Khiron*, where we have a picture that might come from one of Pindar's Odes, of Orpheus sent by the Argonauts to the aged Centaur to ask him to join them in their voyage, and finding him in his cave on Pelion, with the young Achilles at his side. And Chiron tells Orpheus of his half-forgotten youth long ago before he sinned against the gods:

Tels étaient mes loisirs, O Chanteur magnanime !  
 Tel je vivais heureux sur la terre sublime,  
 Toujours l'oreille ouverte aux bruits universels,  
 Souffles des cieux, échos des parvis immortels,

Voix humaines, soupîrs des forêts murmurantes,  
 Chansons de l'Hydriade au sein des eaux courantes ;  
 Et formant, sans remords, le tissu de mes jours  
 De force et de sagesse et de chastes amours.  
 Oui, tel j'étais, mon hôte, en ma saison superbe !  
 Je buvais l'eau du ciel et je dormais sur l'herbe,  
 Et parfois, à l'abri des bois mystérieux,  
 Comme fait un ami, j'entretenais les Dieux !

Since then, he has sought to expiate his fault by giving himself to the training of a race of heroes, bringing them up in all ways of love and wisdom by his side on this mountain : and now his time draws to an end and the last and fairest of them all is with him, the young son of Peleus, to whom he now foretells his fate :

*Viens ! ô toi, le dernier des nourrissons sublimes  
 Que mes bras paternels berceront sur les cimes,  
 O rejeton des Dieux, ô mon fils bien aimé !*

*Tu tombes, jeune encor : mais ta rapide vie  
 D'une gloire immortelle, ô mon fils, est suivie ;  
 L'avenir tout entier en sonores échos  
 Fait retentir ton nom dans l'âme des héros,  
 Et l'aride Troade, où tous viendront descendre,  
 Les verra tour à tour inclinés sur ta cendre.—*

*Le Centaure se tait. Dans ses bras vénérés  
 S'élance le jeune homme aux longs cheveux dorés ;  
 De son cœur généreux la fibre est agitée.  
 Il baise de Khirôn la face respectée ;  
 Et, gracieux soutien du vieillard abattu,  
 Il le réchauffe au feu de sa jeune vertu.*

And then Orpheus is told of the outcome of that famous voyage, and of his own approaching fate and so he returns to those that sent him :

*Il marche, et, reprenant le sentier de la veille,  
 S'éloigne. Le ciel luit, le Pélion s'éveille  
 Tout frais de la rosée attachée à ses flancs.  
 Au souffle du matin les pins étincelants  
 S'entretiennent au fond de la montagne immense ;  
 Le bruit universel des Êtres recommence.*



And the shepherds and shepherdesses, who had wondered at his coming as the sun set the evening before, now see him again, as they once more move their flocks at the signal of the sunrise. And again they wonder at the sight: they start half in fear as they catch sight of

ce même Étranger que jamais nul n'oublie,  
Et qui marche semblable aux Dieux ! Son front serein  
Est tourné vers l'Olympe, et d'un pied souverain  
Il foule sans le voir le sentier qui serpente.

At his coming he had passed them without speech: but this time he stops and gives them a hero's blessing:

Enfants, soyez heureux !  
Pasteurs adolescents, vierges chastes et belles,  
Salut ! Puissent vos cœurs être forts et fidèles !  
Bienheureux vos parents ! Honneur de leurs vieux jours,  
Entourez-les, enfants, de pieuses amours !  
Et que les Dieux, contents de vos vertus naissantes,  
Vous prodiguent longtemps leurs faveurs caressantes !—

Il dit, et disparaît. Mais la sublime Voix,  
Dans le cours de leur vie entendue une fois,  
Ne quitte plus jamais leurs âmes enchainées ;  
Et quand l'âge jaloux a fini leurs années,  
Des maux et de l'oubli ce souvenir vainqueur  
Fait descendre la paix divine dans leur cœur.

For anything as beautiful as this, in the same order of beauty, one hardly knows where to look. Only once before, at any rate, in France had that note been sounded. In French poetry Chénier affords the only parallel :

Ainsi le grand vieillard, en images hardies,  
Déployait le tissu des saintes mélodies.  
Les trois enfants, émus à son auguste aspect,  
Admiraient, d'un regard de joie et de respect,  
De sa bouche abonder les paroles divines,  
Comme en hiver la neige aux sommets des collines.

Et, partout accourus, dansant sur son chemin,  
Hommes, femmes, enfants, les rameaux à la main,  
Et vierges et guerriers, jeunes fleurs de la ville,  
Chantaient : 'Viens dans nos murs, viens habiter notre île ;  
Viens, prophète éloquent, aveugle harmonieux,  
Convive du nectar, disciple aimé des dieux ;  
Des jeux, tous les cinq ans, rendront saint et prospère  
Le jour où nous avons reçu le grand HOMÈRE.

These *Bucoliques* of André Chénier, *L'Aveugle*, *Le Malade*, *La Jeune Tarentine* and the rest, must have been in some sort the model of Leconte de Lisle. But the disciple is not so Alexandrian as his master. Of course, neither is pure Greek. No one whose mind is alive can ever cease to be himself. Chénier is one man, Leconte de Lisle another, and both are Frenchmen not Greeks. But *Khirôn* is nearer to the Greeks of the great century than anything left by Chénier. For a closer parallel to Leconte de Lisle we must cross the Channel and come to Walter Savage Landor.

'O father ! if the ships are now detained,  
And all your vows move not the Gods above,  
When the knife strikes me there will be one prayer  
The less to them : and purer can there be  
Any, or more fervent than the daughter's prayer  
For her dear father's safety and success ?'  
A groan that shook him shook not his resolve.

An aged man now entered, and without  
One word, stept slowly on, and took the wrist  
Of the pale maiden. She looked up and saw  
The fillet of the priest and calm, cold eyes.  
Then turned she where her parent stood, and cried  
'O father ! grieve no more : the ships can sail.'

Not even Leconte de Lisle can produce a parallel to that : still less to the incomparable scene in Hades between the same father and daughter, the

scene of which its author declared, with his own proud humility, 'I was tragedian in that scene alone.' But then, who can? Landor was a greater human being altogether than Leconte de Lisle; and, for this particular work of the classical idyll, he was helped by the fact that he had far more in him of the qualities of the two peoples out of whom what we know as Europe has developed, more of the manliness of Rome, and more of the rippling freshness of Greece, than was ever possible to a man like Leconte de Lisle who, as I have said, never really became a European at all. Still the two men do meet in a common love of classical literature, in a common disdain of many things that filled a large space in the eyes of the world of their day, and in a common capacity for admirable workmanship.

These are, as it seems to me, the directions in which the poetic talent of Leconte de Lisle found itself most completely. He is an artist rather than a creator, a poet rather than a prophet, a scholar rather than a thinker, a temperament rather than a force. He lives not by the strength of his personality but by the quality of his art. His home is in the still life both of nature and of humanity. He is a master of landscape, the still life of nature, and of the idyll, the still life of man. In both he fails, sometimes through a certain querulousness, sometimes through a certain volubility, to convey the impression of a massive strength held in reserve which is always felt behind the work of his great pupil Heredia. But in receptivity of all the influences of Nature, in a kind of delicate intimacy with his subject, in a power of lying perfectly passive under a great

impression, in that sort of stillness of the whole being which in another sphere seemed to the great Mystics the condition of Illumination, he need fear few rivals anywhere. It did not fall to him to move the world, or to give a new interpretation to life: his part was simply to be so quiet himself that the very silences of nature were audible to him, and to keep the instrument of his art in such faultless tune that nature's lightest breath upon it called forth an answer of exquisite verse.

HEREDIA

## HEREDIA

To be bent upon the attainment of perfection in any art is, as a rule, to surrender present success for future fame. To that rule, however, the author of *Les Trophées* was a fortunate and remarkable exception. He had from the first refused to be in a hurry, refused to make any effort to court popularity by concessions to popular taste, or take it by force through the exhibition of a dazzling rapidity or versatility of production. He wrote with great deliberation, and published with still greater. But in spite of all this, and in spite, as it were, of himself, no poetic fame was ever more immediately attained, and none is more securely held than his. It was no mere official accident that chose him in 1896 to salute the Tsar Alexander III. in the name of the Republic. Already, in the eyes of good judges, his single volume had placed him at the head of the poets of France. And, although it has certainly not been his influence that has been the prevailing one in deciding the actual course French poetry has taken in recent years, it is still true, it seems to me, that he is the only French poet, since the death of Victor Hugo, whose work is quite certain to be read with enthusiasm as long as the French language lasts.

To say this, however, is to enter the dubious and

dangerous region of literary prophecy ; and there is no need of travelling so far in proof of Heredia's poetic gift. Posterity is the consoler of those whom their contemporaries ignore, not of those who taste the cup of glory so easily and immediately as Heredia. The more interesting question in his case is not whether he will be honoured by posterity but how it came about that he was so much honoured by his own generation. For, as I said, he certainly neither followed its fashions nor courted its applause. His subjects are remote from modern life, and his style and manner severe. He never attempts either to make us laugh or to make us cry, which are too often the alternative demands made by the modern world upon art. His merit is simply that, in a special and limited field, he has sought and attained perfection, and perfection is exactly the thing which the many can never appreciate. Force, humour, sensuous beauty, pathos, all these can make their impressions everywhere, with any audience ; but perfection—the gift of saying neither too much nor too little, and of saying it exactly as it should be said, without exaggeration and without meanness—this is something which requires an exceptional nature, not merely for its accomplishment, but even for its appreciation. These things being so, the immediate attainment of such a position as Heredia undoubtedly held is a very remarkable achievement and one that is at first sight not easy to explain. The only full explanation lies, no doubt, in the fact that such a gift as was made known in *Les Trophées* can always compel attention and defy opposing currents of opinion ; but a partial solution may, perhaps,

also be found in another direction, one in which a good many Englishmen will not be very pleased to find it. 'The literary influence of academies' is a vexed question which has received classic treatment and into which I shall not have the presumption to enter. But it is not an unreasonable guess that if Matthew Arnold were writing his famous essay to-day, he would have used the case of Heredia as an illustration of the point he wished to make. Officially recognised academies have, of course, often had a most unfortunate influence on public opinion. But that is because they have very often been most unfortunately constituted. That difficulty may be insuperable, and may make it wise to prefer doing without them altogether. But it should not prevent one recognising the useful part they are intended to play and have in fact frequently played. Even the least educated public is fitfully aware, from time to time, of its ignorance in matters of art or poetry. At such times it will receive any authoritative expression of skilled opinion with deference; a rather mechanical and unintelligent deference no doubt; but still deference, which is the point. That is where an academy comes in. If the almost insuperable difficulty has been got over, and the academy consists of the right people, then, of course, its influence on these occasions is exactly what is needed. But one can go further than that. There is one kind of merit which the public is slow to recognise but which the worst constituted academy is almost certain to honour. Dull as it may be to the genius of the innovator, it will almost always be quick to delight in fine work done in



the spirit of the great literary traditions. And there comes in the advantage of its influence with the public. The severity, the self-restraint, the mastery of the instrument of language, the touch of association or even archaism, all the things which are imperceptible or unattractive to the vulgar, have all their charm for those who have themselves been through something of the great initiation ; and it is a real gain where some authority exists which can compel attention to them. At this moment in England there is a case which illustrates this. The ordinary English reading public knows little or nothing of Mr. Bridges, partly by its own fault, still more by his. But he is exactly the kind of poet whom any conceivable academy would have honoured at once ; and, as soon as it was authoritatively pointed out, the public would have willingly recognised, what it will now never know, that the 'Shorter Poems' of Mr. Bridges gave him at once a place among our poets which is second only, among the living, to that of Mr. Swinburne. M. de Heredia had a happier experience. Even the French public could not be expected fully to appreciate the fine quality of the volume of sonnets which he published in 1893, under the title of *Les Trophées*. But when he received the rare compliment of being elected to the academy at once and on the strength of that single volume, the ordinary reader bowed to a judgment which he could not fully understand, and Heredia's name was honoured even where his poetry was little read.

I spoke of *Les Trophées* as a volume of sonnets. That is not literally correct, but it is so substantially ;

for the two longer poems which accompany the sonnets are decidedly less characteristic and important, and it is emphatically as a writer of sonnets that Heredia is, and will continue to be, known. No one who has read his book will doubt that he has taken definite rank among the great masters of that metrical form. There is a long line of them and it contains names far more splendid than that of the author of *Les Trophées* can ever be, but it may be doubted if there be one of all that great company of poets who has done the work which he set himself to do with such entire success as Heredia.

If ever we are in danger of forgetting that poetry is an art, that is, a contrivance for giving the pleasure that comes of beauty in a particular way, there is always the sonnet to remind us of it. Now and then the difficulties may be so completely overcome, and the result may have such an appearance of ease, that one may fancy for a moment that the sonnet is the natural method of utterance for the human heart, as one may fancy for a moment that the incomparable beauty of the Theseus in the Elgin Room or the Torso of the Vatican is only the ordinary and natural form of the human body. But more often the art makes itself felt in the result; and there is a great pleasure in the perception of an artistic difficulty loyally accepted, skilfully confronted, and triumphantly overcome. It is comparatively easy to avoid the appearance of care and art in a long narrative poem or a play; the metre remains the same, line after line, and the ear ceases perhaps to think of it as metre at all. But in the sonnet the most careless reader can hardly fail to

notice that the poet is working under very strict limitations.

What is a sonnet? The perfect sonnet is a good many things which this is not the place to enumerate; it will be enough to say, what every one is supposed to know, that it is a poem consisting of fourteen lines, which must be rhymed on one or other of a few permitted systems; that it should be the expression of a single emotion, rising in mood during the first eight lines, after which there should be a slight pause, and then gradually falling away during the last six. It would not seem necessary to add, unless so high an authority as Mr. Bridges had strangely questioned it in his study of Keats, that the Italian sonnet, which is divided in this way into an octave and a sextet, and in which the first, fourth, fifth, and eighth lines, and the second, third, sixth, and seventh invariably rhyme together, is to be preferred, without any measure or question, to the structure followed by Shakspeare. It is this Italian formation which Heredia has followed, and no one who reads half a dozen of his sonnets will doubt that he has given a new beauty to what was already among the most beautiful of poetic forms.

It has been remarked by M. Jules Lemaitre that 'Les Parnassiens,' the group of poets with whom Heredia was connected, represented the inevitable period of concentration in the Romantic movement. First came, as was natural, its time of expansion, in which the most famous name is that of Victor Hugo; and then, equally naturally, came the time of concentration, and its greatest name is certainly that of Heredia. Instead of a turbid torrent a clear

spring, small, but exquisitely pure; instead of many words, few; instead of a library of volumes, one single book of sonnets. The confused medley of the period of expansion, denunciation and pathos, the sentimental and the sensuous, the rhetoric of politics and the rhetoric of religion, all gave way in its successor to one thing and to one thing only, to beauty. The greatest achievement, perhaps, which is possible to a poet is to interpret the life of his own time, at once with distinction and with truth. That was done for the nineteenth century by Victor Hugo, so far as it was done at all. Even if he had wished, Heredia could not hope to rival a man of Hugo's genius: and no doubt he was never even tempted to try. His path lay elsewhere. He turns aside, like Arnold and Leconte de Lisle, from the spectacle of contemporary life, of which in every age pettiness and vulgarity form too conspicuous a part, and asks us to look away to ancient times or remote countries, where meaner objects are lost in the distance, and only the high places are visible across the seas or the centuries. He was born in Cuba, and he cannot do without the sun; he had in his veins the blood of a companion of Cortez, and never altogether lost, in a life of peace and under a northern sky, the taste of his ancestors for all that is rich and splendid in sight or sound; he is a scholar, and cannot escape from the scholar's ambition, to recreate once more the life of Greece and Rome. He is a 'Romantic,' so far as Romanticism meant the revolt against the poetic ideals of Boileau and Pope; for his sonnets belong to the poetry of the imagination, and not to that of reason and

common sense. But his mind, unlike that of his master Leconte de Lisle, has in it no trace of those characteristics which made Goethe describe the romantic as the sickly, and contrast it with the classical, which he called the healthy. There is in him none of the overstrained sentiment of *Werther* or *Le Lac*; his world is the very antipodes of the morbid, delirious, eternally introspective atmosphere which romanticism too easily learned to breathe, nor is his style the style of the romantics. It has, indeed, their colour and warmth, but it shrinks before their *abandon*. Whatever Heredia's subject may be, the great deeds of Perseus or of the heroes of the New World, the loves of Ronsard or the sorrows of a Roman exile, his style, like his thought, is always calm and grave and self-contained. It recalls at its best, not the triumphs of the romantic style, but the supreme achievements of the poetry of Greece. When we read his finest sonnets, it is not the exquisite but highly charged atmosphere of *La Belle Dame sans Merci* or *Christabel* that we are breathing; we are on the heights where the poetic air has the strength, the serenity, and the purity of the Odes of Pindar. I am not saying, of course, that Heredia has any claim to rank with such a man as Pindar: that is obviously out of the question. The two well-known poetic criticisms of Pindar: Gray's—

Sailing with supreme dominion  
Through the azure deep of air,

and Horace's, more searching—

Immensusque ruit profundo  
Pindarus ore,

point at once to genius of an order altogether distinct from that of the author of *Les Trophées*. Nor has he anything of Pindar's wonderful moralising power. There is not, indeed, anything very original in the ethics of Pindar; but it is not originality that is wanted in dealing with morals; it is the profound seriousness that reaches the heart, and the power of utterance that reaches the intellect, till old things become new, and we listen, as if for the first time, with wonder and delight to some primal truth which we have heard before a thousand times, and never heeded. This gift Pindar had to an almost unequalled degree. He had felt himself in his inmost soul the awe and mystery that hung round human life, and he seems to see everything, the apparently small as well as the apparently great, *sub specie æterni*. And truth and temperance, the sense of the finality of goodness, the conviction of the ultimate justice of God, are burnt afresh into our minds and memories by his incomparable mastery of language. And that is where we get to the point of affinity between Pindar, seer and prophet as well as poet, and a simple artist like Heredia. There are no ethics in *Les Trophées*. Their subject is the world of facts, not that of our explanations of these facts, or of our attempts to find for ourselves rules for right conduct in dealing with them. But, though Heredia does not know how to pass, as Pindar does, from the small events that are visible on the surface of life to the deep things that lie unseen below them, he has more than a little of the gift which Pindar applies alike to the treatment of great things and small, the gift of a style of unequalled felicity.

That is his peculiar contribution to the literature of the nineteenth century. He has shown us once more how perfect a thing human speech can be. And those who have any turn for these things know that a great triumph of art like this is not an isolated achievement, appealing only to the æsthetic side of human nature, but that it comes home to the whole of our being, sense, and intellect, and soul. The highest art has rarely a moral intention, but always a moral effect, for it lifts us into an atmosphere in which all the lower side of life seems unworthy and impossible, much as an early Christian felt who was not afraid to say that the weary and heavy-laden could not fail to forget their cares and sorrows while they stood before the great Zeus of Phidias.

Heredia's single volume, *Les Trophées*, consists of about one hundred and fifty sonnets and two longer poems. The sonnets are divided into a Greek and Sicilian section, a Roman section, one devoted to the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, another to the East, and another to Nature. Rarely has so small a volume revealed so completely a poet's special method and secret. The book shows a definitely marked way of looking at man and life and nature, which is Heredia's own; and it is on this originality of imagination, completed by an equal originality of poetic utterance, on a manner and matter at once beautiful and new, that his claims as a poet must be based. The manner may be described as a reproduction—with an added touch of romance, which makes all new—of the style of Horace in its richest and most carefully elaborate

moments. The matter is still more original. Poetry, the musical employment of human speech by the human imagination, has been put to many uses. Shakspeare could make it unlock all the secrets of all the aspects of human life; Dante used it to make us feel life's awful responsibilities; Milton, its sublimity; Burns, its pathos; the poets of the *Pléiade*, the intensity and the transitoriness of its delights; Wordsworth, its infinite possibilities of sympathy. Heredia puts all this aside. Such uses of poetry are high, perhaps the highest, but they are not for him. Life, as he sees it, is neither a school of morals nor a hothouse of sentiment; what he sees in it is the most splendid of pageants. He has achieved with signal success in poetry what has been so often attempted in vain, and more than in vain, in painting, a series of historical cartoons. It is not every one who will have ears to hear what he has to say, but to him who has, this little volume will tell far better than many larger and more ambitious books the secret of Greece and Rome and what we call the Renaissance. Of course, we do not see them as they really were; that is not the method of art; we see them touched and heightened and made rare and new by the power of the poet's imagination; but that has worked so well as to effect the supreme illusion of art, and make us accept for the natural and historical precisely that which is most artificial and personal. And we are the gainers so; for we have at the foundation the Greece of Pindar and the Spain of Cortez, and, superadded above them, clothing them with a new interest and beauty, we have Heredia's creative imagination.



Take the very first sonnet in the book, *L'Oubli*—

Le temple est en ruine au haut du promontoire,  
Et la Mort a mêlé, dans ce fauve terrain,  
Les Déesses de marbre et les Héros d'airain  
Dont l'herbe solitaire ensevelit la gloire.

Seul, parfois, un bouverier menant ses buffles boire,  
De sa conque où soupire un antique refrain  
Emplissant le ciel calme et l'horizon marin,  
Sur l'azur infini dresse sa forme noire.

La Terre maternelle et douce aux anciens Dieux,  
Fait à chaque printemps, vainement éloquente,  
Au chapiteau brisé verdier une autre acanthe ;

Mais l'Homme, indifférent au rêve des aïeux,  
Écoute sans frémir, du fond des nuits sereines,  
La Mer qui se lamente en pleurant les sirènes.

Would it be possible to give at once more of the fact, and more of the imaginative colour through which facts have to be viewed in order to become matter of art? Among the artists who have tried to express this thought of an inarticulate sympathy between undying nature and the ruined greatness of the works of man, I can hardly think of one who has done it with the firm and sure touch shown here by Heredia. Certainly not Claude or Poussin or Turner; none of them would have refrained from gratifying himself and us with beauty of detail which would have been fatal to the bare grandeur of the scene as it is given in the sonnet. If one thinks of any artist to whose work it can be compared, it is rather to lesser men—Michel, for instance, or our own Cotman in his sterner mood,—that we must go if we would find a man who grasps his subject with anything like this tremendous simplicity and directness.

Does any one find the sonnet hard and dry and unsympathetic? Then he need go no further in *Les Trophées*. There are very few sonnets in the book which show an equal measure of emotion to that with which Heredia has indulged himself here. We are aware, indeed, under the calm surface, of a deep undercurrent of feeling. In imagination and in sympathy the poet has lived through the whole tragedy of human history. But the intensity of his emotion is not paraded but rather suppressed ; it is felt but never seen. Wordsworth says somewhere that it is the business of an artist to give

To one brief moment caught from fleeting time  
The appropriate calm of blest eternity.

And it is a commonplace of criticism that art aims at setting somehow a certain stamp of eternity on the action or face or scene which it depicts. That is just where Heredia's success lies. Perseus and Andromeda are as immortal in his sonnet as they are on a Greek relief. It is indeed of sculpture, at once the most perfect and the most impassive of the arts, and of Greek sculpture, which, more than any other, is disdainful of emotional appeal, that his work always reminds us. There is a great resemblance between the method of the Greek epigrams and that of the finest reliefs on Greek tombs ; and *Les Trophées* is for ever recalling the one or the other. Every one knows the simple single figures, a lady, perhaps, handling some article of her toilet, or, it may be, standing with a maid at her side ; how deliberately the artist refrains from seeking effect, and how surely he obtains it ! We have little

enough modern sculpture which can touch us with this supreme simplicity, which is born of an innate and inalienable instinct for style; but Heredia could give it to us, and his work is more than an exquisite copy; it is a new creation. How grandly, for instance, his *Laboureur* stands out!

Le semoir, la charrue, un joug, des socs luisants,  
La herse, l'aiguillon et la faux acérée  
Qui fauchait en un jour les épis d'une airée,  
Et la fourche qui tend la gerbe aux paysans ;

Ces outils familiers, aujourd'hui trop pesants,  
Le vieux Parmis les voue à l'immortelle Rhée  
Par qui le germe éclôt sous la terre sacrée.  
Pour lui, sa tâche est faite ; il a quatre-vingts ans.

Près d'un siècle, au soleil, sans en être plus riche,  
Il a poussé le coutre au travers de la friche ;  
Ayant vécu sans joie, il vieillit sans remords.

Mais il est las d'avoir tant peiné sur la glèbe  
Et songe que peut-être il faudra, chez les morts,  
Labourer les champs d'ombre arrosés par l'Érèbe.

There it is, just as the Greeks left it in substance, but living again by the force of a new handling, with the old strange charm and still stranger pathos. Here is another funeral inscription, of which one can only say that it is an amazing instance of how old things can even yet be made new. It could not have been written, no doubt, by a man who had never seen the Greek Anthology: but only originality can imitate after this fashion; and *La Jeune Morte* has the authentic signature of Heredia on every line of it.

Qui que tu sois, Vivant, passe vite parmi  
L'herbe du tertre où gît ma cendre inconsolée ;  
Ne foule point les fleurs de l'humble mausolée  
D'où j'écoute ramper le lierre et la fourmi.

Tu t'arrêtes? Un chant de colombe a gémi.  
 Non ! qu'elle ne soit pas sur ma tombe immolée !  
 Si tu veux m'être cher, donne-lui la volée.  
 La vie est si douce, ah ! laisse-la vivre, ami.

Le sais-tu? Sous le myrte enguirlandant la porte,  
 Épouse et vierge, au seuil nuptial, je suis morte,  
 Si proche et déjà loin de celui que j'aimais.

Mes yeux se sont fermés à la lumière heureuse,  
 Et maintenant j'habite, hélas ! et pour jamais,  
 L'inexorable Érebe et la Nuit Ténébreuse.

Nothing is more striking in these sonnets than the grand chords on which they nearly always close. Here it is a line which carries in its very sound the whole depth and gloom, the physical darkness and spiritual hopelessness of the place from which Achilles would gladly have bought escape at the price of being a day-labourer on earth :

L'inexorable Érebe et la Nuit Ténébreuse.

Elsewhere the final line leaves on eye or imagination a picture which, like Keats's

Silent, upon a peak in Darien,

sums up the whole content of the sonnet ; as in the *Antony and Cleopatra* sonnet, where Antony gazes in the eyes of the Egyptian woman only to find there

Toute une mer immense où fuyaient des galères :

or again, as in the sonnet, *Le Laboureur*, quoted just now, where the same grand effect is produced, not by sound, or by picture, but by a thought as true as it is finely imagined and employed, that of the tired labourer's fear that, even in the other world, he may perhaps have to labour still. What an excellently

modern touch that is! The setting of the sonnet is Roman and its manner has the absolute simplicity of the best Greek work: but how very modern, how very Christian, is its understanding sympathy with the poor. We pass in it from the slave-owning world of Greece and Rome to a world slowly changed by centuries of Christianity and then shaken to its depths by the French Revolution, the world of Victor Hugo, of Jean François Millet, of such men as Josef Israels, Alphonse Legros, and William Strang.

It often happens that a friendly critic, in speaking of a volume of poetry, quotes exceptionally fine poems or passages, which send his readers eagerly expectant to the book, only to meet with disappointment because the things quoted stand alone surrounded by mediocre work. The severe self-criticism of Heredia makes this impossible in the case of his *Trophées*. One may almost say that he has printed nothing that is not perfect. Some of the sonnets are, no doubt, of grander conception than others, but the least striking in the series is an artistic whole, finely imagined and finely executed, perfect in its kind, and rendering the reader unconscious for the moment of the possibility of the greater perfection that may be attained in a higher kind. Still we are aware, when we turn rapidly from one part of the volume to the other, that the world of Greece, and again that of the Renaissance, made a greater impression upon Heredia's imagination than Rome, for all her manifold greatness, ever did. The flawless workmanship never fails, but somehow the poet has not entered into the imperial glories of

Rome with the same insight and intensity as he has into the beautiful mythology of Greece or the splendour and daring of the sixteenth century.

It may be worth while to compare specimens of his pictures of the different periods and races with which his sonnets deal. Many attempts have been made to tell again the Greek stories, but nowhere have the opposite dangers of being too Greek to be intelligible to the modern world, or of being too modern to convey any true idea of Greece, been avoided with more splendid success than by Heredia in the sonnets dealing with Heracles and the Centaurs, and those which give the story of Perseus and Andromeda in three scenes, of which this is the first :

La Vierge Céphéenne, hélas ! encor vivante,  
Liée, échevelée, au roc des noirs flots,  
Se lamente en tordant avec de vains sanglots  
Sa chair royale où court un frisson d'épouvante.

L'Océan monstrueux que la tempête évente  
Crache à ses pieds glacés l'âtre bave des flots,  
Et partout elle voit, à travers ses cils clos,  
Bâiller la gueule glauque, innombrable et mouvan

Tel qu'un éclat de foudre en un ciel sans éclair,  
Tout à coup retentit un hennissement clair.  
Ses yeux s'ouvrent. L'horreur les emplit, et l'extase

Car elle a vu, d'un vol vertigineux et sûr,  
Se cabrant sous le poids du fils de Zeus, Pégase  
Allonger sur la mer sa grande ombre d'azur.

I spoke just now of Pindar. Well, it is by such work as this extraordinary sonnet that the poet of *Les Trophées* recalls to us Pindar's style, in which splendour and simplicity are so strangely united that no one can say which has more to do with the

unique effect produced. Then it is worth noting that, rich as the imagination is, it works in strictest obedience to artistic law. No one is more careful than Heredia about marking the division between the octave and the sestet in his sonnets, there being always a slight pause after his eighth line, while the ninth almost invariably turns somewhat upon its predecessor, and begins a treatment of the subject from a slightly different point of view, which is continued, as the rules of the sonnet require, through the sestet to the close. To the trained ear the sound of the perfect sonnet is like the rise and fall of a wave on the shore, only that it has in it no moment so marked as that of the breaking of a wave. No sonnets that were ever written justify this comparison more completely than Heredia's. There is the advance and the recoil, and there is even sometimes, as here in *tel qu'un éclat de foudre*, something like the crash of the breaking wave. Heredia's use of the division between the octave and sestet is in fact exceptionally marked. It is always one story that his sonnets tell, but it is often unfolded in two scenes. We are driven to use the language of painting in speaking of them; and, indeed, it is natural and inevitable that it should be so, for never have the pictorial possibilities of poetry been more splendidly realised than by the poet of *Les Trophées*.

The Roman scenes in this series of cartoons are, as I said, less fine than the Greek. The genius of Rome was, perhaps, too political and practical to get full hold of an imagination which makes such large demands of colour and poetry upon life as that of

Heredia. He has succeeded best in dealing with the story of Antony and Cleopatra, which has, of course, its Oriental side, and with that of the tremendous struggle with Hannibal. The figure of the Carthaginian general, solitary genius breaking itself in vain against the indomitable pride and the splendid political organisation of the greatest of all aristocracies, has evidently filled and fascinated the poet's imagination. This is how he pictures him at the Trebbia :

L'aube d'un jour sinistre a blanchi les hauteurs.  
Le camp s'éveille. En bas roule et gronde le fleuve  
Où l'escadron léger des Numides s'abreuve.  
Partout sonne l'appel clair des buccinateurs.

Car malgré Scipion, les augures menteurs,  
La Trebbia débordée, qu'il vente et qu'il pleuve,  
Sempronius Consul, fier de sa gloire neuve,  
A fait lever la hache et marcher les licteurs.

Rougissant le ciel noir de flamboiements lugubres,  
A l'horizon, brûlaient les villages Insubres ;  
On entendait au loin barrir un éléphant.

Et là-bas, sous le pont, adossé contre une arche,  
Hannibal écoutait, pensif et triomphant,  
Le piétinement sourd des légions en marche.

This is not up to the level of the picture of Andromeda on the rock, but every one who has a turn for these things will recognise its clear and firm draughtsmanship done with an eye on the facts, and the rare gifts of invention it displays. Only a real poet would have used the cry of the elephant as it is used here; and the figure of Hannibal listening under the bridge is a triumph of poetic inspiration.

The finest of the sixteenth-century scenes is



unquestionably that of the voyage of the Spanish warriors to the New World.

Comme un vol de gerfauts hors du charnier natal,  
Fatigués de porter leurs misères hautaines,  
De Palos de Moguer, routiers et capitaines  
Partaient, ivres d'un rêve héroïque et brutal.

Ils allaient conquérir le fabuleux métal  
Que Cipango mûrit dans ses mines lointaines,  
Et les vents alizés inclinaient leurs antennes  
Aux bords mystérieux du monde Occidental.

Chaque soir, espérant des lendemains épiques,  
L'azur phosphorescent de la mer des Tropiques  
Enchantait leur sommeil d'un mirage doré ;

Ou penchés à l'avant des blanches caravelles,  
Ils regardaient monter en un ciel ignoré  
Du fond de l'océan des étoiles nouvelles.

Here we are back again to the level of the Greek sonnets. It would be impossible to give more in fourteen lines. The poverty and recklessness, the heroism and the brutality, the lust of gold, and the lust of adventure, which were so strongly mingled in the conquerors of the New World, are all there ; and so is that New World's strangeness and beauty, its golden haze and unknown stars, its immeasurable possibilities ; Heredia has given them all in verse of amazing and incomparable felicity. The last six lines of the sonnet in particular give us, by their rhythm and movement, such a picture of the enchanting calm of the southern sea as only a man born in the tropics could have attempted, only a born poet could have achieved.

I must find room for two more. The first shall be the opening one of the fine Oriental series. It suggests some colossal figure of Egypt, cut in

marble, or perhaps in granite, by the hand of a master sculptor; an instance for once of that rarest thing in art, a true personification; with all the mystery, and all the splendour, of Egypt glaring out of the terrible face.

Midi. L'air brûle et sous la terrible lumière  
Le vieux fleuve alanguï roule des flots de plomb ;  
Du zénith aveuglant le jour tombe d'aplomb  
Et l'implacable Phré couvre l'Égypte entière.

Les grands sphinx qui jamais n'ont baissé la paupière,  
Allongés sur leur flanc que baigne un sable blond,  
Poursuivent d'un regard mystérieux et long  
L'élan démesuré des aiguilles de pierre.

Soul, taohant d'un point noir le ciel blanc et serein,  
Au loin, tourne sans fin le vol des gypaètes ;  
La flamme immense endort les hommes et les bêtes.

Le sol ardent pétille, et l'Anubis d'airain  
Immobile au milieu de cette chaude joie  
Silencieusement vers le soleil aboie.

One thinks, of course, of another *Midi* by Heredia's master, Leconte de Lisle. But this astonishing sonnet surely surpasses even its splendid predecessor. I have no hesitation in saying that words have hardly ever been used with such tremendous *physical* effect as they are here. We hold our breath, as we read, in the vast silence of the desert ; our eyes shrink from the glare, our senses faint in the overwhelming and intolerable heat. The *Sonnet* gives an even more final expression to this motionless, almost lifeless, trance of a Egyptian noon than is given in a certain scene of D'Annunzio's *Gioconda* to another aspect of Egypt, its vibrating ecstasy of light.

I fancy that Heredia, like Leconte de Lisle before him, found Nature as seen in Europe a little too

cold and grey for his full liking. At any rate, the sonnets entitled *La Nature et le Rêve*, are not equal either to the Greek or the Egyptian series, or to those dealing with the conquest of the New World. But there are still some wonderful things among them. Missing the splendour which he loves so well in the climate of his native tropics, he fixes instead on the solemnity of northern seas and skies. Here is a sunset piece. He gives us the evening of the north, the central idea of which is the coming on of the gloom and mystery of night, not the evening of the south, which is, above all things, a welcome rest from the burden and heat of the day.

Les ajoncs éclatants, parure du granit.  
Dorent l'âpre sommet que le couchant allume ;  
Au loin, brillante encore par sa barre d'écume,  
La mer sans fin commence où la terre finit.

A mes pieds c'est la nuit, le silence. Le nid  
Se tait, l'homme est rentré sous le chaume qui fume ;  
Seul, l'Angélus du soir, ébranlé dans la brume,  
A la vaste rumeur de l'Océan s'unit.

Alors, comme du fond d'un abîme, des traînes,  
Des landes, des ravins, montent des voix lointaines  
De pâtres attardés ramenant le bétail.

L'horizon tout entier s'enveloppe dans l'ombre,  
Et le soleil mourant, sur un ciel riche et sombre,  
Ferme les branches d'or de son rouge éventail.

There is very little consciousness there of the unnumbered beautiful things that Nature has to show us in our northern world, but her slow and solemn melancholy was rarely more finely seized. Seized, but not insisted upon; the scene is once more simply set firmly on the paper and left, in

undoubting assurance of effect, as Crome could leave his Norfolk trees and hedgerows.

That is, I think, the final impression left on the mind by Heredia's work, the impression of a certain splendid simplicity. It is observed of the really great men who have happened to be born to the highest fortune, that they neither seek the deference of the world nor decline it. Their greatness is a fact, and to affect to be unaware of it would be an absurdity. There is something of this in Heredia's manner both as to himself and to his subjects. He knows exactly what he has to say, and he also knows exactly the worth of what he says. His very style is suggestive of the course he has followed. He will not move one inch out of his path to win praise or popularity, but if praise and admiration are lavished upon him, he will not affect the slightest surprise; nor will indifference, criticism, or contempt ever disturb his well-grounded serenity. His business is to give to us a particular form of artistic creation, of which he knows that he alone has the secret; whether we accept or reject it is not his business but ours; and his own is enough for him. It is an example which even the greatest of his fraternity might have followed with advantage; one cannot imagine Heredia deigning to notice the libels of Salmasius or More. Those who care for literature should be grateful to him for this attitude; for dignity is not, to-day any more than in Milton's day, the characteristic which men of the world would ascribe to men of letters.

There is the same aloofness in his art as in his character. If you do not care to listen to him, he

will use neither pathos nor prettiness nor rhetoric to attract you. 'Art for art's sake' is an outrage and an absurdity, if it means that art can stand apart from humanity; but those for whom that phrase is a text for indignant denunciation commit an even greater absurdity if they fancy that art can be dragged behind the chariot wheels of science or morality. Art neither states the facts of science nor preaches the laws of morality; its appeal to humanity is direct and its own. Its business is neither with right or wrong nor with truth and falsehood, but with beauty; neither with the conscience nor with the intellect, but with the imagination.

It is in this sense that Heredia, is, before all things, an artist. He has no cause to plead, no theories to advance; his one desire is to give the most perfect presentation attainable to the special aspect of nature and of human life which he has made his own. It is the triumph of modern art to extract interest from the commonplace; to see the ordinary in such novel light that it shall be ordinary no longer. There can be no triumph more real or legitimate. But the method has perhaps been as often a trick as a triumph. Genius, just because it is genius, may for a moment make common daylight seem to rival sunset splendours; but, except for a moment, and apart from the influence of genius, the extraordinary will always be more interesting than the ordinary, the individual than the crowd. Heredia, who has taken his own course about so many things, does so also about this. For him the great is still more than the small, colour more pleasant than its absence, music than

silence. He has frankly admitted, by his choice of subject, that, for him, great kings and captains, famous poets and lovely women, possess greater attraction than the casual stranger whom the street corner presents to view and whom modern art delights to photograph. There is no special originality, therefore, about his subject. He has, indeed, his own way of seeing it: a way in which there is a touch of something which one can only describe as aristocratic, born partly of blood and race, but just as much of intellect and character; but his subject remains one which needed no poet to discover its interest. It is in perfection of workmanship, not in originality of subject, that his greatness lies. He belongs to the class of poets which includes some of the greatest; Virgil—for instance—and Horace, Gray and Tennyson, of whom criticism, as it works back, says, *materiam superabat opus*; not to the other class, in whose works wealth of matter overwhelms the effort after perfect form, as in Shakspeare sometimes, generally in Goethe, almost always in Browning. The ideal is, of course, a harmonious proportion between the two, profound thought finding perfect utterance. But it is only in the hands of the very greatest men, and only at their happiest moments, that poetry can reach the whole nature of man, æsthetic, intellectual, spiritual; can at once charm the ear, fill the imagination, surprise and inform the mind, touch and fortify the soul. Heredia has no such claims. No one will think of setting him among the supreme names in poetry. But his poetic achievement, small as it is, entitles him to one of the very highest places

on the roll of the poets of France. He took his part in the great literary work which was in process of accomplishment throughout the nineteenth century, the work of leading French poetry out of the Egyptian bondage of a common sense which denied to it its birthright of imagination. But the battle was almost over before he entered the field. Victor Hugo, Lamartine, Gautier, Musset and the rest had done their work before he began, and his was a less stormy task than theirs. A disciple of Leconte de Lisle, he learned from his master that quiet and self-restraint are the key at once of art and of life. But his attitude is perfectly distinct from that of Leconte de Lisle. Instead of the Buddhist pessimism of his master, he offers us, in the words of M. Jules Lemaître, 'the exultation of a soul bent on the superb enjoyment of all beauty scattered throughout the world,' in nature, and in history, and in the works in which humanity has given freest and most joyous play to its genius. His mood is, in fact, the mood of the Renaissance, when a man might be artist and soldier and statesman at once, when the world was alive with a thousand new interests and desires and the human mind overjoyed at the discovery of the infinite possibilities opening out to it on every side.

And, indeed, he reminds us in many ways of the typical Frenchman of that age, of Ronsard. No doubt there is at first sight a very marked contrast between them. The enormous bulk of Ronsard's production, and the poverty of thought and style displayed in a great part of it, his unbounded energy, his overflowing enthusiasm, his amazing

self-confidence, are all as far removed as possible from the reserve and dignity of Heredia. But the differences are principally those that must exist between a young world and an old one. Ronsard was exactly contemporary with the greatest of all ages of expansion: Heredia, as we have seen, represents the culminating point of a movement of contraction. Ronsard felt himself to be not only a poet but a pioneer, an emancipator, the discoverer of a promised land. In the author of *Les Trophées* what one feels behind the poet is not the prophet who ushers in a new dispensation, but the critic who studies and uses an old. The function of Ronsard, again, was to create a language which could respond to the needs of the new era of poetry which it was his ambition to inaugurate; that of Heredia was not the designing or forging of an instrument unknown before, but the sharpening afresh of one blunted by long-continued use. But, in spite of all differences, there remain many points of striking resemblance. Neither poet is, for instance, a man of the greatest original genius; they are rather, each in his own way, and in accordance with his own circumstances, great artists resolved by sheer force of work and will to produce splendid results out of a reluctant material. The artistic habit of Ronsard is that of a profuse abundance; the special note of Heredia is the note of perfection. There must be these differences between the typical poets of a critical and of an uncritical age, but that does not prevent our feeling that Heredia shares with Ronsard the temper of the artist, the temper which regards the whole field of man and nature as



material for art to touch and to transform, and finds the intensest delight and pride in its work. We can fancy too that the man whose sonnets give us, as M. Albalat has said, that soul of antiquity which erudition so often misses, may well share with Ronsard as much as is permitted to our degenerate age of the enthusiasm of the scholar who could shut himself up for three days, seeing no one till he had gone through the whole of Homer. Both, we may be sure, believe in poetry, their own and that of others, as something far above a pretty toy or an elegant accomplishment. In their eyes, we can have no doubt, it is a serious thing, among the very noblest of human productions. Pope may sneer at his own art, and Malherbe may declare that a great poet is no more useful to the State than a good skittle-player ; but a single sonnet of Heredia, or a single ode of Ronsard, is enough to convince us that, whether they succeed or fail, they have had higher thoughts than these of their function. It has been well said of Ronsard that he is the creator of the grand style in French poetry, and Heredia shares with him the large and generous accent which was too little heard in France from the death of Ronsard to the birth of André Chénier. Most conspicuously of all he resembles the captain of the Pléiade in the *fibre héroïque et mâle* of which Sainte-Beuve has spoken. He loves a brave man and a beautiful woman, a rich phrase and a fine cadence to it. What is splendid in colour, what is stately in movement, what is sonorous in sound, it is this which he chooses for himself and which he gives to us.

And, whatever truth there be in the complaint sometimes made, that there is a certain uniformity, and even monotony, of ideas and methods in the French poets, it is certain that no such charge can be brought against Heredia. The author of *Les Trophées* has his own way of looking at things. If other poets are like each other, he is like himself. It is not too much to say that about his slightest utterance there hangs something peculiar to himself, an air of unique distinction.

His death marks the close of a period in the history of French poetry. It had had its phase of expansion with Victor Hugo, who took it out into the broad highways of popular life and feeling: and then its phase of contraction, during which such men as Gautier and Leconte de Lisle and Heredia took it back again from the streets into the seclusion of the study and the workshop. And now, with the poets of yesterday and to-day, it escapes again, as it seems, not this time into the crowd or the streets, but into the clouds, into the idea, into music, into all that offers to cross the border of the suprasensuous world, into mysticism, into the Symbol, into that remarkable region of thought, at once so primitive and so modern, in which the subconscious faculty is greater than the reason, and inexplicability the measure of truth. The keynote of the old world was law, that of the Romantics life, that of the Parnassians form or beauty. But for these new men, it would seem, law is too closely linked with the pedant, life with the animal, form with the mere craftsman: in their doctrine he who will get to the

secret essence of things must leave all these behind and escape into a purer air where the watchwords are such as spirit, and liberty and light. So law disappears in the *vers libre*, definite form in intangible waves of light and sound, the action and actuality of life in a mystic quietism for which the only value of visible things lies, as one poet says, in their esoteric affinity to the primordial ideas which are the sole real and ultimate truth.

All this, of course, applies in very varied degrees to the different men who are roughly classed together as the Symbolist poets, and to individual poets much more at one moment than at another. Nor is it so much an original discovery as some of them have fancied. No new idea ever is so new as its author thinks. The search after the secret has in all ages occupied men who called themselves Platonists, or mystics, or poets. What is newest in Verlaine, and Maeterlinck, and Greghe, and Vielé-Griffin and the rest is the belief, half serious in some of them, wholly serious in others, that things perceived by the sense, sounds for instance, have a meaning of their own independent of their logical and intellectual content. All the world sees, of course, that this is so in music. No logical statement of the theme of a great composition exhausts more than the merest fragment, and the coldest, the least intimate, fragment, of what the sounds convey to the musical ear. The attempt to carry this over into poetry, which has hitherto been an art of words,—that is sounds with a fixed conventional meaning,—and not an art of notes,—that is, sounds without such meaning,—is evidently a very large departure. If, as

often in Mallarmé, the words used appear to have no meaning, and still more if, as is said, they were not intended by their author to have one, must not the result, however successful, be not poetry at all but music?

These questions are too large to be discussed at the end of an essay on Heredia. They are only mentioned to show how completely the old order of which he was so brilliant a disciple, has, at any rate for the moment, passed away. A wave of Celticism such as we see in Mr. Yeats, has passed over all Western Europe during these last years. What will come of it we must wait to see: at present it is enough to mark the gulf of change which separates the poetry which finds its watchword in Verlaine's famous *Art Poétique* from the serenely ordered splendours, the processional magnificence, of José Maria de Heredia.